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THE SKELETON SCHOONER; or, THE SKIMMER OF THE SEA.

A TALE OF BUCCANEERING TIMES ON OUR SOUTHERN COAST.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT,"
"WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL," ETC., ETC.



"GOD ABOVE! IT IS THE SKELETON SCHOONER, AND I AM DOOMED!"

The Skeleton Schooner;

OR,
THE SKIMMER OF THE SEA.

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CHAPTER I.

THE DECOY LETTER.

A MAN sat upon his horse, gazing out upon the sunlit waters of Mississippi Sound, his eyes intently fixed upon a small yacht that was flying away from the silver-sanded shore under the pressure of a five-knot breeze.

The horse was a thoroughbred, and stood with arched neck, champing his bit, and awaiting the will of his master, with all the patience of a well-trained animal.

The horseman was a man of forty-four perhaps, with a darkly sun-browned face, refined in features, and yet with a look that was not wholly frank, for he seemed to wear a mask to hide a heart not pure.

He was dressed in a suit of white flannel, wore gloves upon his small hands, riding-boots covered his shapely feet, and his head was sheltered by a soft Panama straw hat.

Certainly he was a very handsome man, and one whose face indicated powers of fascination far above ordinary mortals, and he seemed one to win the love of men and the almost idolatrous worship of women.

"How strange is it," he said in a low, rich tone, "that our paths in life should have crossed again."

"There seems indeed

"A destiny that shapes our ends,
Rough hew them as we may,"

for I had believed that we would never meet again, and yet here she comes to live upon the very land that adjoins my own, and as the wife of a man who was, in the long ago, my most intimate friend, but is now my foe.

"There he goes in his yacht, and his destination is evidently New Orleans, and if she loves me now, as once she did, she will certainly let me know that she is alone, for she has forgiven the past I know."

He remained silent for some time, his gaze still fixed upon the rapidly receding yacht, until it grew dim in the hazy distance.

Then he started, for he heard a step behind him.

Turning he beheld an old negro man, whose dress and appearance indicated that he was an upper servant upon some of the plantations that lined the shores of the lake.

He was mounted upon a small, snow-white mule, whose hoof-falls were as light as a deer, and came ambling toward the spot where the planter sat on his horse, awaiting his approach with some interest, for he seemed to recognize the negro.

"Well, Uncle Toby, which way?" asked the planter, pleasantly, in that familiar way in which a well-bred Southerner always addressed a faithful and respected servitor.

"I was looking for you, sah," was the reply, as the negro raised his straw bat.

"For me?" and the planter's face slightly flushed.

"Yes, Major Mortimer, and I have a letter for you," answered the negro, with none of the dialect of "the field" which writers seem to consider necessary to place in the mouths of all colored people, but which the "house-servants" are almost invariably free of.

"It has been a long time since we last spoke together, Uncle Toby."

"Yes, sah, and it was a sad time then," answered Uncle Toby, with a sigh.

"I have not forgotten the occasion, Uncle Toby, for it was when I met your master in a duel, and he gave me the wound which so nearly cost me my life," said Major Mortimer, with a slight frown.

"I am glad that it did not kill you, sah, and I know that master is too; but here is the letter, sah."

He handed the planter a delicate little

scented envelope, addressed in a feminine hand, to:

"MAJOR MARK MORTIMER,
The Everglades Plantation."

"Does it require an answer, Toby?" asked the planter, seemingly not caring to read it before the negro.

"Yes, sah."

He broke open the letter and read:

"One who knew Major Mark Mortimer well in the bygone begs an interview with him now for a few moments."

"The bearer of this note will lead Major Mortimer to the writer of it."

There was no signature, but the planter seemed to know well who the writer was, for his face flushed and paled by turns.

"Where is the Senora Nina, Uncle Toby?"

"At the Magnolia Arbor, sah."

"Ah!" and the planter slightly started, but added quickly:

"I will accompany you, Uncle Toby, as the Senora Nina desires it."

The negro bowed, and, turning his mule, rode back into the forest that lined the shores, while Major Mark Mortimer followed, going straight into a net which had been woven for him, and into which the letter had been a decoy.

CHAPTER II.

THE MEETING.

ABOUT a quarter of a mile from the spot where Major Mortimer had been seated upon his horse, gazing at the receding yacht flying away over the waters of the lake,* was a clump of superb magnolia trees, which had grown together in a way to form a natural arbor, in which had been placed rustic seats and a table.

It was a lonely retreat, and known far and near as the Magnolia Arbor.

A path led to it from a plantation house, that could be seen in the distance, and it seemed to have once extended on through the forest toward another handsome homestead a mile away, but the latter pathway seemed now to have been long unused, for it was weed-grown, and its outline hardly traceable.

The Magnolia Arbor was on the boundary line between the Mortimer plantation, known as "The Everglades," and the Wyndham plantation, called by its master, "Lakelands."

Long years before it had been the favorite resort of the two young heirs to the separate estates, Mark Mortimer and Percy Wyndham, and they had fitted it up as a half-way ground, where they were wont to enjoy themselves according to their boyish humor.

Now, seated within the dense shadows of the arbor was a woman, her fingers nervously drumming upon the rustic table, while near her stood in respectful silence a young mulattoress.

The woman seated at the table had a dark but exquisitely beautiful face, with an unmistakable foreign cast, and though past her thirty-seventh year, seemed scarcely out of her teens to an ordinary observer.

Her form was willowy, slender, yet full, and her face almost perfect in its beauty of outline, while her eyes were large, fringed with long lashes, and full of passion.

About her shoulders was thrown a Spanish scarf, though the day was warm, and a vail drooped from a pearl comb in her raven-hair.

Her fingers were heavy with jeweled rings, her ears had suspended from them diamonds of rare size and richness, and about each slender wrist was clasped a bracelet of solid gold, set with rubies.

But the beautiful face was stern now, and the red lips were set, as though with some determined resolve.

"You do not see Uncle Toby coming yet, Phoebe?" she asked, addressing the mulattoress, who arose and glanced out of the arbor, and answered:

"No, mistis,† not yet."

"He must come, for this is my only chance to save my husband—bah! I forgot," and she ended her sentence with a look of withering scorn, called up by some thought that had suddenly flashed through her mind.

"Yes, mistis, he is coming," said the mulattoress.

"And alone?"

* The Sound was, years ago, called a lake.

† The negro style of saying mistress.

The woman asked the question almost savagely, so earnest did she seem.

"No, mistis, the major is with him," was the answer.

"Thank God!"

Firmly and fervently were the words uttered, as though in prayer, and then the lovely face became flushed, yet calm.

Up to the arbor rode Major Mark Mortimer, looking very handsome indeed, and with a face that was flushed with expectancy.

"Here, Uncle Toby, hold my reins," he said, as he dismounted.

The old negro caught the reins thrown him, but also dismounted and led the horse and his mule to a tree near by.

At the rustic entrance to the arbor Major Mortimer paused and raised his Panama hat, while he bent low in silence, for he beheld the white-robed form before him.

"Major Mortimer, I am glad you have come," said the woman, in her full, rich tones.

"And I am glad, Nina, to meet you once more after these long years," he answered, advancing as though to take her hand.

But she drew back, and said sternly:

"Be seated, sir, and know that I am glad to meet you again, oh, so glad! but between us there is a great gulf fixed, which you can never cross."

"Nina, I—"

"Hold! Mark Mortimer, I sent for you that we might meet again, and we have met for a purpose."

"But, Nina—"

"How dare you call me by that name, sir?"

"Then, Mrs. Wyndham, let me say that what there is between us need not be discussed even in the presence of slaves," and he glanced toward the mulattoress and Uncle Toby, who just then came to the arbor door.

"They are here by my order, sir, for they must hear all that passes between us."

"Would you be so mad, Nina Wyndham?" he said, sternly.

"Yes, I would be mad enough to do anything, Mark Mortimer."

"There, be seated, while I tell you why I sent for you."

She motioned to the seat upon the other side of the table.

But he folded his arms and said calmly:

"I prefer to stand here, and, if it is your wish to draw slaves into your confidence, I am ready to hear what you would say."

"It is my wish, for I can trust that man and his daughter with my life."

"I do not doubt it, yet still I prefer to keep my own secrets," he answered, with some nervousness of manner.

"They will be kept inviolate by Uncle Toby and Phoebe, and I want them as witnesses."

"Do you know where my husband is?"

"I saw him awhile since in his yacht, heading toward New Orleans."

"True, he has gone there, and that is why I sent for you."

"Indeed!" and Major Mortimer arched his brows with surprise.

"Yes, and do you know why he has gone to New Orleans?"

"How should I know?"

"It interests you."

"In what way?"

"He has gone there to seek you."

"Ah! why did he not seek me at my house?"

The woman laughed bitterly, and asked quickly, as though changing the subject:

"You remember this spot, I suppose?"

"Well."

"Here you and Percy Wyndham have spent many hours as boys and bosom friends?"

"Yes, long ago."

"True, it was long ago, for I am nearly thirty-eight."

"You do not look it, Nina, for you have changed little since we last met, twenty-four years ago," said the man, honestly, and with no evident intention to flatter her.

"You are mistaken, Mark Mortimer; I have changed greatly, for then I was a loving girl, a child really, innocent of mankind, and now I am a woman, a wronged one, and a revengeful one."

He fairly started at her vehement manner, and said:

"No, no, Nina, not revengeful, for your nature was not one to bear malice and hatred."

"Was not, Mark Mortimer, but it is now, and my heart is full of the venom of hatred and revenge, as you shall know, and, if it were not that I have a conscience left, I would kill

you as you stand there, without one atom of pity for you."

She arose to her feet as she spoke, and he fairly cowered before her blazing eyes.

CHAPTER III.

A GREAT WRONG DONE.

"FOR God's sake be calm, Nina!" pleaded Major Mortimer, as he met the fierce gaze of the woman fixed upon him with hatred and menace.

"Be calm? Yes, I have been outwardly calm, but inwardly a slumbering volcano, since coming to live here I learned your secret, Mark Mortimer."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, let it remain my secret," he said.

"Not until you have heard what I have to say, sir."

"Then speak, and let me go."

"Oh! you were willing enough to come, when you believed that I possessed the same doll-baby nature as of yore; but now, when you find me a tigress, you wish to fly from me."

"Did you hear? I said my husband had gone to New Orleans to seek you."

"He knew where to find me, had he desired to see me," sullenly said the planter.

"And he sought you at your home."

"He did not."

"He sent Toby there with a letter, asking you to meet him here."

"I received no such letter."

"True, for I bade Toby return, and say you had gone to New Orleans, to remain some days, and there he went to find you."

"What could have been your motive for this?"

"That you and Percy Wyndham should not meet."

"You certainly speak in riddles, Mrs. Wyndham," said the planter with a sneer.

"Oh! I shall be explicit enough, sir, as you will find to your cost."

"The last time you met Percy Wyndham here, was just twenty-five years ago."

"He was a passed midshipman then, in the navy, and you were a cadet in the army."

"Am I right?"

"Yes."

"He was engaged to a lovely girl, Belle Linton, and returned home on leave, expecting to make her his wife."

"But, to his sorrow, ay, and to his horror, he found that you had arrived some months before on leave, and, taking advantage of his cruising in foreign seas, had undermined her regard for him by false stories—"

"Woman, I will listen to no more of this," he said angrily.

"Oh yes, you will hear all I have to say, for Uncle Toby has my orders to shoot you dead in your tracks, should you attempt to leave, until I give you permission, and you know that he is noted as a good shot."

The major wheeled suddenly upon the negro, and an oath escaped his lips as he saw him standing only a few paces away, a shot-gun in his hands, and a face that was sorrowful, but resolute.

Mark Mortimer knew Uncle Toby well, and was well aware that he would obey his mistress, be the result what it might, so he assumed an air of indifference, again folded his arms upon his broad chest, and remained silent, a sneering smile upon his face.

Mrs. Wyndham laughed lightly, but it was a bitter laugh, and then continued:

"Rumor had it, and how these rumors originated, you know best, that Percy Wyndham had lost his home and slaves by gambling with a foreign noble, and the father of Belle Linton, a grasping miser, urged her to become your wife, which she did."

"And your wife Percy Wyndham found the one he expected to make his bride."

"Yes, the wife of the one he had loved and trusted as a brother, and it turned his heart to gall, and he forced you to meet him on the field of honor."

"This was the spot chosen, and you were taken along yonder weed-grown path to your home, in what was supposed to be a dying condition, while he returned to his vessel, believing he had killed you."

"But you struggled hard with death, Mark Mortimer, and after long months of suffering again got on your feet, and following your physician's advice, went on a voyage along the Gulf shores of my native land."

"Have you forgotten one night, when the schooner on which you were a passenger heard

cries and the report of fire-arms off on the water?"

"No, I feel that you have not forgotten it, and that, as there was a dead calm, you took the schooner's boat, and bravely went to the aid of those who so sadly needed it."

"You found a small sailing vessel becalmed upon the waters, and those on board in the cruel power of Lagoon pirates, who had come alongside in their *pirogue* and captured her."

"You nobly and fearlessly attacked the pirate and retook the vessel, saving my parents and myself, who had been taken prisoner."

"That was our first meeting, Mark Mortimer, and it wakened in me the deepest love for you, which increased to idolatry as the time went by."

"My father soon after died, and it was his wish that I should become your wife."

"Gladly I consented, and we were married, as I believed, at the side of his death-bed, and for a few short months I was a happy girl-wife."

"But alas! one day you set sail for a run down the coast, a violent storm came up, and the next day they told me your little vessel had been driven ashore, and tied to it was one of the three peons you had as a crew."

"That you were drowned no one doubted, and my sorrow nearly drove me mad, and following close upon this came my mother's death."

"An uncle became my guardian, and as he had no children, he urged that I should take his name and forget the past."

"I was his heiress, he was going to Spain on a mission for his Government, and I acquiesced in his urgent entreaty and accompanied him."

"In Cadiz I met a young man under circumstances which made him my friend at once."

"My uncle was set upon one night by assassins, who knew he had with him a large sum of money, and they certainly would have taken his life and his gold, for they were four against one, had not succor arrived."

"It was a young officer of the American navy, and he sprung to my uncle's aid with a vigor that laid one of the assassins dead at his feet, while another he severely wounded, and with my uncle's aid managed to secure the other two."

"Of course he became our friend after that, and a few months after, urged by my uncle, and admiring him for his many noble qualities, I became, as I then believed, his wife."

"I committed a double sin, and one which fell heavily upon my own head, for I did not tell him of my past life and former marriage, for my uncle had made me swear not to do so."

"I soon came to love my husband, and we roamed about the world together, for he did not seem to care to return to his native land, and begged to be kept in foreign seas on duty."

"One night while crossing to Egypt in the vessel of war on which my husband was a junior officer, my only child, a boy, was born, and then I was almost a happy woman."

"But soon after, the death of my uncle caused me to return to Mexico, whither my husband was unable to accompany me, though he followed me there a year after."

"Although I saw him every year to two, it was only for a few weeks at a time, and in all the years I passed in my Mexican home he failed to discover the secret I hid from him so foolishly."

"At last, as Mexico was in a turmoil, he urged that I come to his home in America to live, and willingly I consented, for I wished my son to know more of the land that was to be his own."

"We came, and as you know for a long time have lived quietly at Lakelands, my husband having resigned from the navy the day our boy entered it as a midshipman."

"Yesterday my son returned home, and also there came another person, a Mexican attorney-at-law, and, in connection with my two inheritances, that from my parents, and the one left me by my uncle, my secret had to be told to my husband."

"I told him all, and how, until I came to Lakelands a few months ago, and knew that you lived, that I believed you dead."

"From his lips I learned that you had stolen from him his affiance in the long ago, and that you were married when you pretended to wed me in Mexico."

"Mark Mortimer, my husband forgave me my sin, but I have never forgiven you the wrong you did me."

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S REVENGE.

WHILE Mrs. Wyndham was talking, Major Mark Mortimer had not moved, though the sneer on his face departed, as he saw how she unfolded the past to his shame, and his face became white and stern.

Once or twice he glanced hastily over at the mulattress, and at Uncle Toby, who still held his gun, to see the effect upon them. But they either knew all before, or were wholly indifferent to the story which was so momentous to Nina Wyndham and himself.

Then he would look into the burning eyes of the woman he had wronged; but only for an instant, as he dared not meet her withering gaze.

Throughout what she said, she spoke with perfect calmness, though her form quivered slightly at times, and showed how deep was her emotion, and how great her effort at self-control.

When she ceased speaking, he said in an assumed tone of indifference:

"I have listened attentively to your story, Nina, and think you have, at this late day, made a great mistake to make your shame known."

"I think not, for I have a purpose in what I do," was the cool reply.

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"Yes."

"I am all attention," he sneered.

"Your wife is dead?"

"She is, and has been for many years."

"Captain Percy Wyndham though lives."

"True."

"And you?"

"And I have no idea of dying either."

"Had I not had Toby tell Captain Wyndham you had gone to New Orleans, you would have been a dead man now."

"Ah! then he intends to call me out?"

"He did so intend."

"But will do so upon his return, for by killing me, he makes his marriage legal."

"Yes, your death will accomplish that purpose."

"And you wish it, of course?"

"Am I so lost to shame, that I would not protect the honor of my child when it lies in my power?"

"But does it not occur to you that I might not be the one to fall?"

"How do you mean?"

"If Captain Wyndham meets me in the *duello*, I might, you know, Nina, kill him, and that would leave the affair as complicated as before."

"Had I intended that Captain Wyndham should meet you in a duel, Major Mark Mortimer, I would not have sent him off on a false errand to New Orleans."

"Ah! you wish to make your boy kill the man who has kept from him the right of his name?"

"I have heard he was a superb swordsman and dead shot, though strangely effeminate?" sneered Mark Mortimer.

Nina Wyndham smiled, but answered:

"I know he would gladly kill one who brought shame upon his mother; but, thank God! I have kept the bitter, sorrowful secret of the past from him."

"You certainly speak in riddles, for, though wanting me to die, you still keep your husband (for permit me thus to call him for form's sake) and your son from killing me, 'or being killed by me."

"Ah! now you touch the right chord, Mark Mortimer, when you say or being killed by you."

"You think then such an occurrence might come to pass?" and the man's face was bitter and sneering.

"I have heard that two hours of every day of your life you spend in rifle, pistol and sword practice, and it is said of you that with a blade you have no equal, and you never miss sending a bullet straight to the spot at which you aim it."

"You have been pretty well informed, madam."

"I have thus insured my life against accidents," was the cool reply.

"Then you know why I will not see those I love fall by your hand; but there is one you shall meet to settle the wrong you have done."

"Name him, and I assure you I will place myself wholly at the disposal of any one you may select to fight your battles for you."

"Do you swear to this?"

The Skeleton Schooner.

"I do."

"By all you hold sacred on earth and in heaven, Mark Mortimer?"

"I do."

"Then I am the one you are to meet, Mark Mortimer," and the woman sprung to her feet, her face quivering with unfeigned joy.

CHAPTER V.

AT BAY.

No one who knew Major Mark Mortimer had ever called him a coward; but rather considered him a man whose courage was above the average.

He had entered the army when a mere boy, and during the Indian wars that followed the Revolution had greatly distinguished himself and risen to the rank of major, when, because there came a time of peace, he resigned and returned to his plantation home and family, which consisted of his wife and two children, a son and daughter.

He had been a wild, reckless man, and mayhap it was that he brooded over his wrong toward his friend, and his crime toward Nina Valjos, the lovely and confiding Mexican girl, that caused him to become austere and keep men aloof, from his reputation of being a stern man, little caring for the companionship of his fellows.

He passed his time in his library, or on horseback, with gun and dogs, riding about his plantation, but religiously devoted two hours of each day, not excepting the Sabbath, to practicing with rifle and revolver, and with a sword, having had one of his negroes, his valet, Duke, take lessons to serve as a foil for him.

Duke was a superb specimen of manhood, and the pet of his master and family, a circumstance that rendered him unpopular with the rest of the slaves.

Mark Mortimer had named his son after him, and had trained him up to be a thorough *athlete*, and rider and marksman, while he also intending him for the naval service, had made a good sailor of him.

He regretted however to see that the youthful heir to The Everglades was very wild, and feared that he would become worse as the years went on, in spite of all that could be said and done to prevent, and he had just been thinking of some plan to check his son's fast career, when he spied the yacht containing Percy Wyndham leaving the shore, and had been interrupted in his meditations by the coming of Uncle Toby with Mrs. Wyndham's decoy letter.

Having given my reader a better insight into the man whom Mrs. Wyndham had brought at bay with his past crimes, I will now return to the moment, when she made the startling announcement that he should meet her in the *duel*.

In spite of his nerve the man trembled violently, and his face turned to the hue of a corpse.

For some seconds he could not speak, and then he cried:

"Nina, for the love of God! what do you mean?"

"Just what I said, sir," was the cold reply.

"That you intend to force me into a meeting with you, if you can?"

"I intend so to do."

"I will never face you with a weapon in my hand."

"For fear you may kill me?" she sneered.

"I could do so did I desire."

"You did worse in the wrong you did me long ago."

"I trusted you, and you inveigled me into a marriage, when you already had a wife."

"I do not hate her memory even, but rejoice that she is not alive to know your shame."

"But you I do hate, with all the venom of my heart and soul, and by the Heaven above, Mark Mortimer, you shall face me as a man would face another."

"Your husband and your son I will meet, but not you."

"My husband and son you shall not meet, sir, but me."

"I wronged them, though God knows I did it unintentionally, and my hand shall make the one my legal husband, and give the other the legal right of his name, and that can be done only by your death."

"I will not meet you."

"If you kill me, well and good, for Toby and Phoebe here will say to the world it was an accident, that I shot myself, as I am known to practice as much as you do; but to my hus-

band and son, for I will call them so, they will tell the truth, and your master, Satan, will not let you slay all three of us."

"No, no, I am no coward, to fear a woman in a duel."

"You were coward enough to cruelly wrong me."

He winced under the words, and answered:

"I did you wrong, I admit, but I see no way out of it now but to let the matter drop, unless Captain Wyndham wishes to push the affair with me, under which circumstances I am wholly at his service."

"Now I bid you good afternoon, my dear Mrs. Wyndham."

He raised his hat politely and turned to go, when Uncle Toby said sternly:

"Hold on, Mars' Mortimer, for I have orders to kill you, sir, and I must obey mistis, tho' I wouldn't like to, sah."

Mark Mortimer uttered a deep oath, for he saw that he was in a trap.

Not for months had he ridden away from home without firearms of some kind; but that day he had done so, and the exception seemed likely to be the death of him, as he knew well Toby would kill him.

Had he been armed with the double-barrel pistol he usually carried he could have dropped Toby dead in his tracks, and taken the chances.

But, as it was he was powerless, and the thought enraged him almost to madness.

"You are in my power, sir, and you have only to meet me," said Mrs. Wyndham firmly.

"And I say I will not."

"You are mistaken, sir, for if you do not, Toby shall shoot you down as he would a mad-dog."

"I give you a chance for life by killing me."

"I believe you are tired of life and wish to make me the means of ending your existence."

"Perhaps I am tired of life."

"Is it a wonder that I should be after all you have made me suffer?"

"I will harm you no more than I have."

"But I will not want to die, if you are dead, so face me, or be killed by Toby, and have your body thrown into the lake, and have no one to know your fate."

The man was in a quandary, and knew not what to say or do.

There were certain feelings of manhood in his heart that prevented him from facing a woman in mortal combat.

Her soul he might destroy by making her criminal, but her body he would not kill, was his reasoning.

Yet he saw that he must act one way or the other, and after a moment of silence his face brightened, and he said with firmness:

"You are decided in having me meet you, madam?"

"I am."

"I will do so," and he threw himself upon a seat with the air of a man who had determined upon some ordinary venture.

CHAPTER VI.

FATAL PREPARATIONS.

A GLEAM of fiendish delight passed over the face of Nina Wyndham, when she heard the words issue from the lips of Mark Mortimer that he would face her in a duel.

"You have decided well, sir," she said, in a tone as calm as she could command from her inward joy.

"Well, as my acquiescence in your very foolish plan seems to please you, please let me know what arrangements it is your intention to make?" remarked Major Mortimer quietly.

"I had Toby bring weapons for the meeting."

"They are, as you can see, four foreign made dueling pistols, and you can choose any one of them and load it yourself, while I do likewise."

"Phoebe can mark off the ground, for I will need uncle Toby to keep his eye and gun on you, as you are a very cunning man, Major Mortimer, and will escape this meeting by any trick that may present itself to your very fertile brain."

"Have you a choice of distance?"

"Ten paces, say, or fifteen," he answered, indifferently.

"Oh! you prefer the latter to destroy my aim; but let me tell you that I am as dead a shot as you are, Mark Mortimer, so that will avail nothing, as I intend to kill you, unless you kill me first."

"Make the distance what you please, then, madam."

"Then I'll say ten paces."

"Phoebe!"

"Yes, mistis."

"Please step off ten paces, east and west."

The mulattress stepped out of the arbor and obeyed.

"Now, major, we will toss up this locket for choice of position."

"See, it is one you gave me, and has your miniature upon one side, and mine on the other."

"If it falls with your face downward, I win, if mine is down, you win."

"Toss it yourself, please."

"There is no choice of position," he said, sullenly.

"Pardon me, sir, but there is, for the sun straggles through those branches, and might destroy the aim of the one facing it."

She spoke in the most *nonchalant* tone imaginable, and, though very pale, and with eyes that seemed to be slumbering sparks of fire, she was very calm.

With an impatient imprecation, Major Mortimer took the locket and the three stepped out of the Magnolia Arbor, for Toby followed closely behind with his gun.

"Now toss for choice, sir, as the seconds say," said Nina Wyndham, with a smile.

He threw the locket into the air, and watched its whirling until it fell.

"Your face is down, sir, and I win," said the woman calmly, and the man turned slightly pale, for he seemed to feel it might be a presentiment of evil to himself.

"Phoebe, bring that box of pistols, please," ordered Mrs. Wyndham in the same soft tones.

The mulattress obeyed, and, at a sign from the woman, the man took up a pistol.

"This is a beauty," he said, with real admiration of the weapon.

"I think so."

"They were made for my uncle, who was a great duelist."

"There is powder and ball, sir, and the flint you will find perfect, I believe."

To set the example, Nina Wyndham took up a small flask and at once loaded her pistol, adjusting the flint with care, and seeing that the pan was filled with powder.

Having watched her load the pistol, Major Mortimer very carefully set to work to charge his weapon, several times remarking upon its workmanship.

"Now, sir, to protect myself, kindly sign this paper, which I have written in anticipation of this meeting."

She handed him a small piece of paper, and he read it aloud.

"This will certify that for a great wrong done Mrs. Nina Wyndham, *nee* Valjos, long years ago, I consented to give the satisfaction a man has the right to demand of me upon the dueling field, and if my death follow, let it be known that the meeting between us was conducted with all fairness and honor, and in the presence of two witnesses, slaves on the Lakelands plantation, and known as Toby and Phoebe."

"You will sign this paper?" she queried.

"Certainly, for it can do no harm, as I believe the affair will be honorably conducted by you, though I am wholly in the power of yourself and slaves."

"I would hate myself were I to take advantage of even you, Mark Mortimer," answered the woman.

"Well, give me pen and ink, and I will sign it."

She returned to the arbor, he following her, and placing the paper upon the rustic table, she pushed toward him an ink-horn and quill pen.

Hardly had their backs been turned however, when Phoebe said in a hoarse whisper:

"I'll do it to save mistis, and may the Lord forgive me."

She bounded to where the pistol box lay upon the grass, seized one of the weapons therein, and put in its place the one which the planter had loaded and laid down upon the gnarled trunk of the tree, where they had been loaded.

The other she adjusted the flint in, poured powder in the pan, and placed it as Mark Mortimer had left it.

"What are you doing, child?" asked Uncle Toby.

"Saving mistis, sah," was the response of the faithful mulattress to her aged father, just as the planter and Mrs. Wyndham came out of

* Caps and cartridges were not used in that early day.

the arbor, and approached the spot where was to be the strange meeting between a revengeful woman and a crime-stained man.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DUEL.

MARK MORTIMER had so much confidence in his own perfect marksmanship, and certainly with cause, that he had made up his mind, when he decided abruptly to meet Mrs. Wyndham, to knock the pistol from her hand with his bullet, and give her her life, and then take the consequences of his act with Captain Wyndham.

With this determination he picked up the pistol, as he believed, which he had laid upon the trunk of the tree, and walked quietly to the stand which had fallen to his lot.

Nina Wyndham, without the slightest hesitation did the same, and then beckoned Uncle Toby and Phoebe to her side.

"This man is merciless to men and women alike, so my death at his hands may follow, and I beg you again, in such an event, not to neglect a single one of my instructions to you."

"I will not, mistis," said Uncle Toby, impressively.

"You may depend upon me, mistis," answered Phoebe, with one hand shielding her eyes, as though to shut out the scene before her.

"I trust you both.

"Good-by, Uncle Toby."

She stretched forth her hand and grasped that of the old negro, who never uttered a word, but bent his honest face downward as though to shield his emotion.

"Good-by, Phoebe, and remember you and your father are not forgotten in my will."

"I dislike to break in upon this very pretty scene, my dear madam, but I have an engagement, as a friend takes tea with me, and I would not be late," coldly said Mark Mortimer, looking at his watch.

"I'll not delay longer, sir, but you will not keep your engagement, if in my power to prevent," was the calm response.

"Who will give the word to fire, may I ask?" returned Major Mortimer, with a sneer.

"As Uncle Toby was at the duel between yourself and Captain Wyndham, sir, he will understand doubtless how to give the word now."

"As you please, for I yield to anything in this very remarkable meeting."

"Uncle Toby, you will give the word, if you remember how," said the mistress of the old slave, and he answered politely:

"I have seen that duel, mistis, between master and Major Mortimer a hundred times in my dreams, and I remember every word that was said, and can never forget them," answered Toby, with impressive earnestness.

"There you and I differ, Toby, for I seldom think of it, although the wound your master gave me so nearly cost me my life," put in the planter in his nonchalant manner.

"Take your stand there, Uncle Toby," ordered his mistress, and the order was obeyed by the negro taking the designated spot.

"Now cock your gun."

"Yes, mistis."

"Now, when you give the word to fire, if Major Mortimer fires in the air, shoot him in his tracks."

The planter paled at this stern order, for it showed how terribly in earnest the woman was, and that she meant to force him to fire upon her to clear her own conscience should she kill him.

"I'm in for it to the death, it seems," he muttered, with an oath.

"Are you ready?"

Toby asked the question in deep, calm tones, and Phoebe started, and covered her face as though she were the one in danger.

"Yes, slave, and anxious to end this farce," replied the planter, savagely.

"Yes, Uncle Toby," responded Nina Wyndham, and there was not the slightest tremor in her voice.

The two—the hater and the hated—stood ten paces apart, and the man was upright, cool, and his paleness alone showed that he deeply felt the scene.

The woman was without a tremor of nervousness, held her pistol in her right hand, amid the fold of her waving dress, which were drawn gracefully around her with her left.

Her form was drawn up to its full height, and, but for her pallor, her face would have been exquisitely beautiful.

At one side, near the Magnolia Arbor, stood Phoebe, the mulattress, and at equal distance between the two was Uncle Toby, his gun resting across his arm and ready for use.

It was a thrilling, strange picture, and the suspense must have been fearful to all, as the old negro hesitated for answers to his fearful question:

"Are you ready?"

Receiving the answers, he continued in a deep, distinct tone:

"Fire!"

With lightning-like quickness the weapons came to a level, and the triggers were touched at the same instant by the man and by the woman.

But the report came only from one, and that was the weapon held by Nina Wyndham.

Straight to its mark went the bullet, and Major Mark Mortimer sprung high into the air and fell his full length upon the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING DECLARATION.

FOR an instant after the fall of her enemy Mrs. Wyndham stood like a statue, the smoking pistol still in her hand, and then she walked straight forward and gazed down upon the man as he lay at her feet.

His face was white, stern, and a bullet wound was in the very center of his forehead, proving how deadly had been her aim.

Bending over, she took from his lifeless grasp his own weapon and glanced at it.

"Good God! it was not loaded."

"I knew there was but one report," she cried, in a tone of bitter anguish.

With the bound of a panther the mulattress sprung forward, and, dropping upon her knees, raised her face and hands imploringly to her mistress, while she cried in broken accents:

"Forgive me, mistis, but I did it."

"You did what, Phoebe?" asked the woman in cold tones.

"I did it to save you, mistis."

"You did what, Phoebe?" came the question a second time, in the same hard tone.

"Changed the loaded pistol for the unloaded one, mistis."

The cry that burst from the lips of the woman frightened both Toby and his daughter terribly, and reeling, she stretched forth her hands, her eyes stared wildly, and then with a groan she fell upon the body of the corpse.

"Lordy! I have kilt my mistis now," groaned poor Phoebe, and Uncle Toby stood by in silence, not knowing what to say or do, so deeply was he shocked.

But a bounding step was heard behind him, and the next instant a youth appeared, and threw himself by the side of the woman, while he cried in tones of great anxiety:

"In the name of Heaven, Uncle Toby, what has happened, that I find Major Mortimer dead, and my mother unconscious?"

"Marse* Percy, there has been sad work here, sir, and I am glad you have come," said Toby in a trembling voice.

"Here, Phoebe, quit your crying and try to restore my mother to consciousness, while you, Uncle Toby, tell me what all this means?"

The youth spoke in the terse, commanding tones of one who was born to command, and expected to be obeyed.

He was about eighteen years of age, and possessed a form of rare elegance, being well matured.

His face was such, that were it not for his tall form and broad shoulders, he could have passed for a maiden, and a beautiful one too, had he donned feminine attire.

He had inherited from his mother her perfection of features, and large, lustrous eyes, in which dwelt a look of sadness, seemingly natural to them, rather than called there by scenes of a sorrowful nature he had passed through.

Dressed in a suit of white linen, with a broad-brimmed Panama hat sheltering his long chestnut curls, he certainly was a personage to rivet attention under any circumstances, but doubly so now, as he knelt on one knee beside his mother, and had his face turned up to Uncle Toby, listening to his low, impressive words.

"Marse Percy, it is a sad story, sah, and one I hate to tell you, but I must, for your father is away, and you may see a way to help us all out of this mighty trouble."

"It seems, sah, that your mother had a

*The negro abbreviation of master.

grievance, a bitter one against the major there, which she would not let your father settle, or you, sah, fearing you might be killed, sah. So she sent master to New Orleans, pretending he would meet the major there, while she forced him to fight a duel with her.

"God in Heaven! do I hear the truth?" cried the young man springing to his feet, and grasping the old negro by each shoulder with fearful energy.

"I tell you only the truth, sah."

"And he fought my mother?"

"Yes, sah, he was forced to."

"And she killed him?"

"Yes, sah."

"Heavens! she may be wounded then," cried the youth anxiously.

"No, sah, for the major did not fire."

"God bless him for that."

"It was not his fault, sah, for my girl Phoebe changed his loaded pistol for an unloaded one."

"And my mother knew this?"

The youth almost gasped the words, and was most deeply moved.

"No, no, sah; Phoebe did it to save mistis, and when she told her of it, then it was she fainted, sah."

"By the heavens above! but there is some strange mystery in all this—ha! who comes here?"

Percy Wyndham turned as two horsemen appeared upon the scene, drawing rein suddenly as they beheld what they did before them.

"Ah, Mr. Wyndham, there seems to have been some deadly work done here," said one in a surprised tone.

The youth drew himself up to his full height, and answered with the utmost calmness:

"There has, sir, for I just killed Major Mortimer in a duel, and my mother fainted upon suddenly discovering what I had done."

CHAPTER IX.

FOR A MOTHER'S SAKE.

THE self-accusation of Percy Wyndham was an intense surprise to old Toby and the mulattress, Phoebe, but they realized that he had taken upon himself the determination to wholly shield his mother, and they dare not do otherwise than acquiesce in his wishes, even had they felt a desire to do so.

The two gentlemen who had arrived on the spot were planters of the neighborhood—Merton Massey and his son Morgan—and their appearance, with dogs and guns, proved that they had been on a hunting excursion, and were returning by a path through the forest to their own home further up the coast.

"This is a sad affair, Percy," said the elder gentleman, in a serious tone, and he added:

"We were just on our way to The Everglades, having promised poor Mortimer to dine with him upon our return."

"How did this affair occur?"

"Major Mortimer was the insulter, sir, and I but did as any man of honor would do—fought him," was the cool response.

"But where are your seconds, Percy?"

"We needed none, sir, under the circumstances; but I will not here discuss the matter, but elsewhere, when, if my word is not considered sufficient guarantee that it was an honorable meeting, I am willing to take the consequences," said the youth, in a haughty tone, as though to dismiss further conversation upon an unpleasant subject.

Then, turning to Toby, he ordered him to go with all haste to the stables for the carriage, but to breathe no word of what had happened, and requested Mr. Massey to break the news at The Everglades, adding:

"I will remain by the body, sir, until you return."

The two horsemen rode away, earnestly discussing the affair together, and instantly turning to Phoebe, the youth said:

"Phoebe, you heard my explanation of this affair?"

"Yes, Mars' Percy," said the girl, who was weeping.

"So it must be."

"Yes, Mars' Percy."

"Your story must be as mine, do you hear?"

"Yes, sah."

"I wish to see you and your father alone as soon as we go to the mansion, and to your care I intrust my mother."

"I'll take care of her, sah."

"I know it, good Phoebe, and in the future I will not forget you or Uncle Toby."

"I know that, sah; but mistis is recovering."

The son bent anxiously over his mother, who gave a sigh, and then opened her beautiful eyes with a wild, frightened look.

"Ah, Percy! what has happened?" she gasped, as though the truth had not yet flashed upon her, and, as Percy had drawn her away from the dead body of the planter, she did not at first see it.

"Mother, I have just killed Major Mortimer in a duel, and you fainted when you arrived with Toby and Phoebe and saw what I had done."

The youth spoke with perfect calmness, and gazed his mother unflinchingly in the face.

She looked at him in a manner that was a dazed stare, gazed at the dead form of the planter, and asked in a whisper:

"What did you say, my son?"

Word for word he repeated his former utterance.

She rose slowly to her feet, glanced at her son, then at the body, and then turned to Phoebe, asking in a hoarse tone:

"Phoebe, did you hear what Mars' Percy said?"

"Yes, mistis."

"He said he killed Major Mortimer."

"Yes, mistis."

"Why does he say this?"

"It is so, mistis," replied the mulattress, as firmly as though she were telling the truth.

Mrs. Wyndham passed her small hand across her brow several times, as though striving to recall her bewildered mind, and then asked:

"Percy, am I asleep or awake?"

"Awake, my dear mother, but I fear you are not well, as the shock of suddenly coming upon the scene, and beholding Major Mortimer fall dead when we fired, has been too much for you— Oh! here is Uncle Toby," and turning to the old negro, who came up panting, and with the remark:

"Sam will be here, sah, at once with the carriage," Percy Wyndham continued in a significant tone:

"Uncle Toby, my mother does not seem to understand that I killed Major Mortimer, so please explain how it was that she came up with you and Phoebe and saw him fall."

The old negro's powers of conception were very quick, and he realized that his young master was determined to play the part out before his mother, and said:

"Yes, mistis, when the major and Mars' Percy fired you fainted."

"My God! have I gone mad?" groaned the poor woman, and then, with the fearful thought crowding upon her in all its horror, she reeled, uttered a loud cry, and sunk into the arms of her son, again unconscious, just as the carriage drove up from the mansion, with Sam, the negro driver, the very picture of amazement and terror at what he beheld.

CHAPTER X.

THE TIDINGS.

THE most intimate friends of the family at The Everglades, were the Masseys, and Mr. Merton Massey seemed alone the boon companion of the stern major.

On his way to meet him at his home, it was a great shock to Mr. Massey to come upon the body of his friend, just slain, and he was so overcome with emotion that he urged his son to ride on ahead and break the news to the daughter and son of the dead man.

Morgan Massey, a handsome young planter, was always only too anxious to go to The Everglades, for his heart had been deeply touched by the beauty of Mabel Mortimer, then in her fifteenth year, but who looked already a woman, and had scores of admirers among the neighboring young gentlemen.

Now, however, he shrunk from the visit, as his father did, and determined to go in search of the major's son and heir, Mark, whom he hoped to find at a little cottage called Wild Idle Retreat, and which was distant from the mansion a couple of hundred yards and used by the young heir as his loafing place and where he was wont to receive his boon comrades, and indulge in orgies to the bent of his humor.

Here were kept his guns, pistols, swords, and other treasures, and a sideboard, well filled with liquors, wines and cigars, was an important piece of furniture in one of the two rooms that composed the cottage.

Riding up to the Wild Idle Retreat, Morgan

Massey saw Duke, the negro valet of the major, advance to take his horse.

"Well, Duke, where is Master Mark?" he asked pleasantly.

"Gone to Orleans, sah."

"Went over in his yacht this morning."

"And Miss Mabel?" he asked in a disappointed tone.

"In the hammock on the sea side, sir."

"Duke," began Morgan Massey, quietly, "there has been trouble over at the Magnolia Arbor."

"What is it, sah?" quickly asked the negro.

"Your master is dead, Duke."

"Dead?"

The negro hoarsely uttered the words, and he drew his form up to his full height.

He was a splendid specimen of manhood, with great broad shoulders, muscular limbs and over six feet in height.

His face was handsome, his hair black, glossy and in ringlets, and his eyes and mouth fearless and resolute.

"Yes, he was killed in a duel."

"My master killed in a duel, sah?"

"Yes, Duke."

"Who killed him, sah?"

There was a dangerous, threatening light in the dark eyes, as he asked the question.

"Percy Wyndham."

"Captain Wyndham killed him, sah?"

"No, his son, Master Percy."

"Why, sah, he looks like a woman, and could never have killed my master in a square fight."

"I will go there, sah."

"No, Duke, order the carriage to bring your master's body home, while I go to the mansion and break the news to Miss Mabel."

"It'll nearly kill her, sah."

"I know it; but there comes my father, and he will return with the carriage for the body of the poor major."

"See father, Duke, while I seek Miss Mabel."

Morgan Massey dismounted and strode away toward the mansion.

He was a well-formed, open-faced young man of twenty one, with a free and easy manner, that was sure to make for him friends, and being rich, he was considered a good match, and both Major Wyndham and Mr. Massey had hoped some day that he and Mabel would become man and wife.

As for Mabel Mortimer she was a beauty in every sense of the word.

No one would have believed her less than seventeen, so perfectly molded was her form, while her face was *spirituelle* in loveliness, and reflected the purity of her heart.

When Morgan Massey approached, having gone around the rambling old mansion to the sea side, he found her reclining in a hammock, swung between two massive pines.

The lake spread away upon one side, placid and beautiful, and a balmy breeze coming from off the water had soothed the young girl to sleep, her book having fallen from her hand upon the ground.

Behind her was the lawn, dotted here and there with magnolia, pine and live-oak trees, and beyond, surrounded by flower gardens, *arbor vitæ* and *gloria-mundi* hedges and arbors, was the spacious mansion, once the home of a Spanish noble, it was said.

Mabel Mortimer was clad in sunny white, and a lace scarf was thrown about her, half-hiding her form; but her face, flushed with some pleasant dream, and fanned by the balmy breeze from the lake, was visible.

Her hair had become loosened from its comb, and hung in a massive braid upon the ground, coiling there like a black snake, and a ringlet or two upon her forehead was quivering under the wind.

"My God! what a sad task is mine, to waken her from dreamland and plunge her into sorrow," groaned Morgan Massey, as he stood for an instant gazing upon her.

But nerving himself to the sad task before him, he called softly:

"Miss Mabel!"

The maiden smiled, but did not open her eyes.

"Miss Mabel!" he called in a louder tone.

With a strange voice in her ear she awoke with a start, and sprung from the hammock, her large, deer-like eyes fixed upon the intruder.

"Pardon me, Miss Mabel, for seeking you here, but I felt it my duty to seek you," said the young man.

The tone and manner of her visitor impressed her, for Morgan Massey was always light-hearted, but now he seemed sad and embarrassed.

"Your pardon I gladly grant, Mr. Massey, only I was startled, as at first I did not recognize your voice."

"Come to the mansion with me, for I suppose your father is there, as papa told me you were both to be here this afternoon," she answered now, herself.

"Miss Mabel, we met your father, as we went hunting this morning, and he asked us to stop on our way home."

"Then we little dreamed that I would have to be the bearer of sad tidings to you."

He spoke in a tone that could not fail to impress Mabel deeply, and she turned deadly pale, and asked in a voice that trembled:

"You have tidings of evil to my brother?"

She knew the wild nature of her brother, and his follies, and it was for him she feared.

"Duke told me that your brother sailed for New Orleans this morning, Miss Mabel, and—"

"Then my father! quick! what of him?"

She grasped his hand eagerly as she spoke and riveted her gaze upon his face.

"Miss Mabel, I could not be the bearer of worse tidings of him," he said, moved to the heart.

"Oh, Heaven, have mercy! He is dead."

She gasped the words, and her head sunk until her chin rested upon her bosom.

"He is dead, alas! Miss Mabel."

She tried to speak, to raise her head, but the blow had been too severe, and unconsciousness came to her relief, for she tottered forward and fell into the arms of Morgan Massey, who quickly bore her toward the mansion, his heart aching for pity of her intense sorrow.

CHAPTER XI.

FOILED REVENGE.

DUKE'S first act, after the departure of Morgan Massey, to break the sad tidings to Mabel, of her father's death, was to call to a negro near by, and order the carriage at once to the Magnolia Arbor.

Then he joined Mr. Massey, who just then rode up to the cottage.

"Well, Duke, I suppose my son has told you of the sad affair?" said the planter, in the familiar and kindly way in which the true Southern gentlemen were wont to address the slaves.

"Yes, sah, I have heard the fearful news, and ordered the carriage."

"Will you go in it, sah, for my poor master?"

"Yes, Duke, for I do not feel like seeing Miss Mabel yet, as I am all unnerved."

"Come in and have some brandy, sah," said Duke, and Mr. Massey dismounted and entering the cottage, helped himself to the liquor, after which he went out on the little porch, saying:

"I will wait here until the carriage is ready."

As soon as the planter's back was turned, Duke poured out a glass full of the fiery liquor and dashed it off, and again repeated it.

He was no drunkard, and could be trusted with the liquors under all circumstances; but now his face, fierce, and calm, showed that he craved some stimulant.

Leaving the house by the back door, after stopping an instant at a case of arms, he went straight to the carriage house, where the negroes were hastily hitching the horses to the vehicle, and said sternly:

"Get Mr. Massey, Jake, and he will tell you where to drive."

Entering the stable, it was but the work of an instant for him to throw a saddle and bridle upon a large, dark roan, and mounting him he dashed away like the wind.

A short ride brought him upon the scene at the Magnolia Arbor, where he beheld Uncle Toby upon the box with the coachman, and Phoebe upon the back seat of the vehicle, supporting in her arms the unconscious form of her mistress.

As he dashed up he heard Percy Wyndham say:

"Now drive rapidly home, Sam, and Toby let no one but Phoebe and yourself go near my mother until my return."

"Yes, sah; but are you not coming?" asked the faithful Toby.

"Not now, for I shall remain with the body until Mr. Massey returns with the carriage."

The vehicle from Lakelands rolled rapidly

away, leaving Percy Wyndham standing over the dead form of Major Mark Mortimer and gazing sadly down upon it.

Just then, out of the magnolia thicket dashed Duke, the faithful valet of the dead man, and Percy turned quickly at his approach.

He had seen the negro before, and a glance was sufficient to show him now that his face was inflamed with rage, as he drew up his horse and sprung to the ground.

Without a glance even at Percy Wyndham, Duke rushed forward and dropped upon his knees before the corpse, seizing the cold hand in both his own, and gazing fixedly at the white, upturned face, with the wound in the intellectual forehead.

"Oh, God! master! you are dead, as they told me."

"But, master, Duke yet lives, and he will avenge you."

"Hound! do you dare threaten me?" and Percy Wyndham started toward the huge negro, his eyes flashing fire.

"Yes, I do threaten you, Master Percy Wyndham, for having murdered my master—ha!"

The negro staggered backward, and, unable to recover himself, fell, for he had received a blow in the face that he had not believed could be dealt by one like Percy Wyndham.

But, springing to his feet, he uttered a yell like a wild beast attacking his prey, and drawing a long knife, rushed upon the youth, crying as he did so:

"I came here to kill you, boy, and now my master shall be avenged!"

Perfectly calm Percy Wyndham slipped his hand under his loose sack-coat, and it returned with a pistol, while he said, sternly:

"Back! you black dog, or I lay you beside your master!"

But the negro was fairly maddened with grief and revenge, and sprung forward to clutch his foe, when out rung the sharp crack of a pistol, and he fell like a log by the side of his master, just as the carriage of The Everglades rolled up, and Mr. Massey sprung out to behold what had happened.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ARREST.

"WELL, sir, it seems you are in a killing mood to-day!" said Mr. Massey, as he sprung from the carriage and advanced toward Percy Wyndham, who stood on the spot where he had fired, the smoking pistol still in his hand, and the huge negro writhing at his feet.

"I am always in a mood, sir, to defend my honor and my life, as any man shall know who attempts to defame the one and take the other."

"The negro attacked you, then?" said Mr. Massey, feeling assured, from the manner in which Duke darted off, his face fierce with passion, that his love for his master might have driven him to revenge his death, and at the same time avenge himself, as he knew that his easy berth must end, and he descend to a level with the other negroes on the plantation.

"He did, and I shot him."

"And Major Mortimer, I judge from your words, Mr. Wyndham, defamed you?" asked Mr. Massey.

"Mr. Massey, I am not on trial before you, sir."

"I killed Major Mortimer for what I considered just cause, and as there were no seconds of our equals present, I may be arraigned for the act."

"If so, I will answer before a tribunal, but not here."

"That negro is not dead, I see, and he may recover, though I shot to kill."

"Good-afternoon, sir," and wheeling on his heel, Percy Wyndham mounted Uncle Toby's white mule, which had been left for him, and rode away, while Mr. Massey sprung to the side of the negro, who had moved and shown signs that he was not yet dead, however fatal the wound might prove.

Upon reaching the mansion, Percy Wyndham at once took upon himself the management of affairs, by ordering the wife of Toby, Nance, to take charge of his mother, aided by her daughter Phoebe, and to admit no one to the wing in which were the rooms of her mistress, nor permit her to leave them herself or to see any one.

Then he sent a couple of negro fishermen of the plantation at once in a fleet yacht to New Orleans, with a letter to his father begging his

immediate return and telling him all that had happened.

Having done this, he put Uncle Toby on guard at the house, with orders, if any one came, not to admit them, unless they were officers of the law.

Then he said:

"Now, Uncle Toby, I want you to tell me all about this sad and mysterious affair."

The old negro seemed worried, for he did not wish to betray the confidence of his mistress; but knowing as he did that Percy had boldly taken upon himself his mother's act, and that complications might follow to put the young man in a false light, did he not know all, he answered:

"Mistis told me, Mars' Percy, ter tell master, who sent me over to The Everglades, that the major had gone to New Orleans."

"Why did she do this?"

"The lawyer what come here, sah, from Mexico, made some kind of a rumpus, which caused mistis to tell master she had met Major Mortimer before, and he had insulted her."

"This was strange indeed."

"Yes, sah; but master was going to call the major out, and mistis feared he might be kilt, so she sent me over with a note, soon as master set sail for New Orleans, asking the major to meet her at Magnolia Arbor."

"Then they had a talk, which neither me or Phoebe could understand, and mistis forced the major to give her satisfaction."

"This is most remarkable."

"Yes, sah; and she made him sign a paper, which I have here."

Uncle Toby handed the document, signed by Major Mortimer, to his young master, who read it over twice, and then said:

"This will be useful, as it mentions not the name of his opponent, and I can appear as such."

"Then, sah, they took their positions, but gal Phoebe, knowing the major was a fearful dead shot, had changed his pistol for one that wasn't loaded."

"And this my mother knew nothing of?"

"Certainly not, sah, and it made her faint when she found it out."

"Just then you come up, sah, and you know the rest."

Percy Wyndham was silent for some time, and then asked:

"Did my mother write the major a note to meet her at Magnolia Arbor?"

"Yes, sah, and when you done what you did, I took it off his body, so as not to compromise mistis."

"You are a noble friend, Uncle Toby, and from my heart I thank you," said the youth earnestly, taking the note which the old negro handed him, and which was the same received by Major Mortimer, when he sat on his horse watching the departure of the yacht in which was Captain Wyndham.

Percy Wyndham read it carefully, and put it in his pocket, after which he said:

"Now, Uncle Toby, remember what I tell you."

"Yes, sah."

"Wait, and let me tell Phoebe also, so that there can be no mistake whatever in the matter."

The mulattress was called, and for half an hour the two negroes and their young master conversed earnestly together.

Then Phoebe returned to the wing, where her mistress was pacing to and fro like a tigress, and yet in a kind of dazed manner, and Uncle Toby took up his position as guard on the front piazza, while Percy Wyndham sought his own room to meditate over the blow that had suddenly fallen so heavily upon the happy household.

Uncle Toby had not been a great while at his post, when he saw four horsemen approaching.

At a glance he recognized one of them as the constable from the village some miles away, and the others as neighbors.

"Well, Uncle Toby, it seems there is trouble at Lakelands?" said the constable cheerily as he dismounted with his companions and ascended the broad steps of the piazza.

"Yes, sah, and at The Everglades too," replied Toby.

"Is your master in?"

"No, sah."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to New Orleans."

"Was he in the fishing-smack we saw going out awhile since?"

"No, sah."

"How did he go, then?"

"In his yacht, sah."

"The yacht went hours ago."

"Yes, sah."

"Ab!" I mean your young master."

"Mars' Percy?"

"Yes."

"He is in, sah: but you asked for master."

"True; well, tell Master Percy that Constable King would like to see him."

Toby called to the butler and sent him after Percy, who soon after put in an appearance, calm and courteous, as was his wont, for he said pleasantly:

"Good-afternoon, gentlemen."

"Mr. Percy, I am sorry, sir, but, I have a warrant for your arrest," said the constable.

"On what charge, sir, may I ask?" was the cool question. "I regret to say a serious one, sir, for it charges you with the murder of Major Mark Mortimer."

"Who swore out this warrant against me, Constable King?"

"Mr. Merton Massey."

"Very well, sir, I suppose you wish me to accompany you, or will you accept my word to appear?"

"I am sorry I cannot, sir, but must take you to the village jail with me."

"To jail?" and the youth started, and the paleness of his face increased.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, I will go with you; but my father is absent, and my mother in a very precarious situation, so I regret to leave her."

"I am sorry, sir, but I must do my duty," said the constable, in a kindly tone.

"I know that, so will do nothing to prevent it."

"I will join you in a few moments, prepared to go with you."

"Toby, set refreshments before the gentlemen," and turning, Percy Wyndham went to his room.

But in a short time he returned, and having ordered his horse, mounted and rode away, a prisoner charged with murder.

CHAPTER XIII.

SAVED BY THE DEAD.

NOT very many miles from the plantations of Lakelands and The Everglades, was a small and thriving village upon the Gulf.

It was upon the shores of the lake, had a good anchorage in its front, and boasted a few stores, several churches, and something under a thousand inhabitants.

The inn of this village was a favorite summer resort for the wealthy citizens of New Orleans, and the young and fast planters of the neighborhood were wont to congregate there several times a week and indulge in gambling, drinking and other pastimes to suit their reckless humor.

The head of this clique of kindred spirits was Mark Mortimer, junior, and when the news came that the father of their popular comrade had been slain there was great consternation among the bevy of young bloods.

The news of the death of Major Mortimer flew like wildfire, and when it was said he had been killed by Percy Wyndham, junior, and in a duel where there were no witnesses, people hinted openly that there could not have been fair play, for how could a youth like Percy kill so gallant a champion as the major, whose powers were well known.

Toward evening the young planter, Percy Wyndham, was brought into the village and lodged in the jail, and soon after came Mr. Massey and his son, who gave an account of what had happened, as to their knowledge, and it was decided to call an investigation at once before the justice, and see if there had been anything wrong at the duel, which would cause the law to take the youth in hand and hold him for trial for murder.

A fair duel was not objected to in those days; but an unfair one was worse than murder, so a hearing was called for the following day.

Mr. Massey, a kind hearted man, had, under the influence of the first shock, and witnessing the grief of Mabel Mortimer for her father's untimely end, at once sent for the constable to get out an order of arrest under the charge of murder.

Now he regretted having been premature,

and was most anxious to have Percy Wyndham released, if there was no cause for holding him in durance vile.

The following morning therefore was selected for the trial, while the master of The Everglades lay dead in his elegant home.

The small court-room was crowded, and rumor had it that Percy Wyndham had sought no counsel, and only intended to tell his story as it occurred, offering Toby and Phoebe as witnesses, if they would be admitted, for negro testimony was not legal in those days.

The youth came into court white, but perfectly self-possessed, and glanced over the sea of faces turned upon him.

Those that had said the Wyndhams were a proud family, too proud to mingle with their neighbors, felt now that they were right, for the youth seemed now, even in his trouble, as proud as Lucifer.

And those who had called him effeminate, now changed their minds, for there was that in the stern face in repose and trouble, that wholly banished the look of womanly sweetnes natural to it.

The judge was a blunt, honest man, and lost no time in calling up the case.

To Percy Wyndham he said:

"Mr. Wyndham, you are arrested upon a most serious charge, preferred by one of our most respected citizens, and God grant you can refute it. Major Mortimer fell by your hand, and there were no witnesses present, which brings your meeting to a basis not in the dueling code."

"Please state the particulars, Mr. Massey, of your coming upon the scene," and the judge bowed to the planter, who arose and told his story, just as it had occurred, and his son, Morgan Massey, repeated it in almost his father's words.

"Now, Mr. Wyndham, what have you to say in your defense?" asked the judge.

"Simply, sir, that Major Mark Mortimer, having acted dishonorably toward my father long years ago," (Percy had heard from Toby of the duel of his father and the major,) "he sought to revenge himself upon me for the wound he had received at the hands of Captain Wyndham, and offering me insult, to engage me in an affair of honor, I yielded promptly to his wishes and we fought, with a result you know."

Percy spoke with a distinct and ringing voice, and his words made a good impression.

But the judge asked,

"Why had you no seconds, Mr. Wyndham?"

"It was an affair that demanded settlement at once, as I did not wish my father to take the matter off of my hands."

"What was the nature of the insult offered you?"

"That I decline to state," was the decided response.

"What were the terms of your duel?"

"To stand ten paces apart with pistols, for we had two weapons each, and advance together, firing, and to fight to the end."

"Major Mortimer fired I suppose?"

"He drew trigger first."

"Strange that he should miss, for he is a remarkable shot."

"And so am I," was the cool reply, yet delivered with not the slightest air of braggadocio.

"You are certain the major fired first, sir?"

"A man badly wounded in the body, judge, may fire at a foe and kill him; but one who receives a death wound in the head is out of battle the moment the bullet touches him," was the reply of the young man.

"That is true," said the judge, while a hum of affirmation went the round of the room.

"And your word is the only proof you have that the duel was a fair one, Mr. Percy?"

"The word of an honorable man, sir, should be proof enough; but one other I care not to name and two of my father's slaves saw Major Mortimer both draw trigger and fall."

"The slaves' testimony we cannot admit."

"True, I know it is valueless in law."

"But the other person?"

"Was one whom I will not permit to be dragged here, for witnessing what she did I fear has unseated her mind."

"It was my mother, sir."

"Her testimony might aid you, sir."

"I prefer to suffer the penalty rather than drag her here."

"Yet I shall have to insist, Mr. Wyndham, that she appear."

Percy Wyndham seemed now anxious and worried for an instant, and all present noticed it. But, after a moment of thought, he said:

"I have another witness, sir, that the duel was a fair one."

"Name him."

"I had not expected, sir, to bring the words of the dead up to save me from any alternative, but, anticipating that a meeting without seconds might be misunderstood, I asked of Major Mortimer his signature to a paper, which he gave."

"And have you that paper, sir?"

"I have."

"You will show it?"

"If you demand it."

"I do."

Percy Wyndham drew from his pocket the identical paper which Major Mortimer had signed for Nina Wyndham.

It was written in a bold hand that had nothing feminine about it, but was signed by Major Mark Mortimer, whose signature was known to several present.

"This is satisfactory, Mr. Wyndham, if Mr. Massey recognizes the late major's signature, for he knew him best of all of us."

"It is Major Mortimer's signature," said the elder Massey, firmly.

Others said the same, and the judge turned to Percy Wyndham and said:

"The very man you killed, Mr. Wyndham, saves you."

"You are free to go, but in future affairs of a like nature secure seconds."

Percy bowed haughtily, and turned to go, when there was heard a loud cry in a woman's voice, and Mrs. Wyndham came rushing into the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

GONE MAD.

THE cry of Mrs. Wyndham had startled every one in the court-room, but none more so than Percy Wyndham, her son, who well knew her voice.

He turned paler at the cry than he had at the danger that had threatened him, for, had he been proven guilty of taking unfair means to end the life of his enemy, a "jury of his peers" in that country would have very quickly brought him guilty of murder in the first degree, and, in spite of his proud name and wealth, he would have ended his young life upon the gallows.

Following the cry, as I have said, Mrs. Wyndham came into the room.

All gave aside to allow her to pass, and straight to the front she went.

She was dressed in a black silk velvet riding-habit that fitted her faultless form to perfection, and a black s'ouch hat, in which were sable and dark-green plumes, was upon her head.

Her small hands were incased in gauntlet gloves, and in one she held a whip, the handle studded with precious stones.

The other hand upheld her flowing skirt.

Adown her back, and almost to her feet, for it had shaken loose from its comb and fastenings, hung her black hair in waving masses, and falling upon each side of her face but increased its pallor.

Her eyes were burning with a strange light, her lips stern, and her whole face quivering with emotion.

A beautiful woman she certainly was, and a murmur of admiration arose on all sides.

But her eyes were upon the tall, slender form of her son, her only child, so strangely like herself in beauty, and to his side she bounded, while she cried in piteous tones:

"Oh, Percy! Percy! are they daring to try you for my act?"

"Mother, be calm and come with me," the youth said, almost sternly.

"No, I will tell them all, for I alone am guilty."

"See, Sir Judge, I am the one you seek, for I killed Mark Mortimer, ay, shot him dead for a revenge I have long treasured in my heart."

"Ha! ha! Percy, now you see that I would not allow you to suffer when I can save you."

Her words created the wildest consternation in the assemblage; but seeing that Percy Wyndham wished to speak, the judge rapped loudly for order and said:

"Silence! Now, Mr. Wyndham, I will hear you."

"Judge, I beg that you will aid me in leading my poor mother to a carriage, for you see, alas! that I spoke the truth."

"Yes, it is too evident."

"She is mad," answered the judge, in a kindly tone, and turning to Mrs. Wyndham, who glared upon him like a tigress, he continued:

"Come, madam, return home, I beg you, with your son."

"You say I am mad, do you?" she said, in a hoarse whisper.

"You are ill, my dear Mrs. Wyndham, for the shock of poor Mortimer's death at the hands of your son has unnerved you."

"Go with him to your home, and soon all will be well."

She looked bewildered an instant, and then her eyes rested upon her son, and in tones that touched the hearts of all who heard them, she cried:

"Percy, my boy, my son, do you say that I did not kill Mark Mortimer, and that it is but a freak of my disordered brain that makes me so believe?"

Percy Wyndham was as pallid as a corpse; but in a voice that had not the slightest tremor he replied:

"Yes, mother, you are mad to make such an assertion."

"Put come, I am cleared of all stain of dishonor in my meeting with Major Mortimer, and you must return with me at once."

"Mad! mad! ch God! I must be mad when my son tells me I am," shrieked the unhappy woman, and bending her head until her chin rested upon her bosom, she allowed herself to be led from the room, and without resistance entered the carriage of the judge, who placed it at the disposal of Percy Wyndham, whose face seemed suddenly to have had years added to his life, so stern and hard had it become.

CHAPTER XV.

REMORE.

IT was a startling surprise to good Uncle Toby, when the carriage of Judge Lathrop rolled up the door of Lakelands, and he beheld his young master spring out, and call to him to aid him in carrying his mother to her rooms.

"Mistis is in her room, sir," said Toby.

"She is not, for she is here with me."

"Call Nance and Phoebe at once."

"Lordy! this is a miracle sure," said the old negro, as he hobbled off after his wife and daughter.

He found Phoebe sewing at the door leading into the wing, and asked:

"Child, where is your mother?"

"Inside, sah," answered the mulattress.

"And mistis?"

"In the back room, sah."

"Then there must be two of 'em."

"Go to the front door, child, for Mars' Percy is there and wants you."

The negress obeyed, and Uncle Toby entered the room, to find Aunt Nance dozing over her darning.

"Old 'ooman, where is mistis?"

"Sh—, old man, she have been sleepin' this long time," said the old woman.

"Just look in an' see, honey."

Nance "looked in" and gave a yell, for the bed was vacant, and the window was open.

"Don't get skeer'd, honey, for we have found mistis."

"Come on, for Mars' Percy wants you, but I is afeard he won't trust the Toby famly no more, honey."

Old Nance saw that something serious was the matter, and she was mystified at finding her mistress gone; but she followed Toby to the front door, where they met Percy coming into the mansion having his mother in his arms.

"Oh, Lordy! is she dead?" groaned Nance, while Phoebe was wailing bitterly, as only a negress can, when their emotions find vent in tears.

"No, she is very ill though."

"Is her room ready?" said Percy, in a voice that made them start.

"Yes, Mars' Percy."

He bore his mother to her room and laid her upon the bed.

Then he turned to the old negress and her daughter, and said sternly:

"Nance, I leave my mother, in the care of yourself and Phoebe, and one of you must be ever with her, for it seems she has eluded you, dressed herself in her riding-habit and escaped to the stables, where she got her own horse and came to the village."

"If you allow my mother to escape again,

or any one to see her, I will sell you both to the Cuban slave traders."

This threat was sufficient to cause both Nance and Phoebe to start, for slavery in Cuba was a tenfold worse lot than slavery in America, and the old woman cried:

"Oh, Mars' Parsy, I'll mind mistis, sah, day an' night, 'fore God I will."

"And I too, Mars' Percy, won't let my eyes off of mistis, sah," said Phoebe.

"See that you keep your word then," and the youth turned away, followed by Uncle Toby.

Dismissing the coachman of the carriage that had brought them home, after a generous recompense, Percy Wyndham told Uncle Toby what had occurred at the court, and have him explain to Phoebe that his mother must be considered as out of her mind until such time as he thought necessary to make known to her his motives for taking upon himself the blame of her act.

"At present, Uncle Toby, she cannot appreciate that I did it to save her from the disonor it would cast upon her, for she is too nervous and ill to think.

"But soon she will understand that it is best for the affair to rest upon my shoulders, and then I hope all will come well."

Leaving the old negro on guard as before, at the front door, with orders to admit no one, the thoroughly unhappy youth sought his own room and paced the floor in bitter meditation.

"Oh God! what a blow is this to fall upon us," he cried.

"Life, only a day ago seemed full of happiness, and now it is over-burdened with gloom.

"There is some dark mystery in the past yet to be cleared up, and my father must tell me all, for I would know why my mother sought the life of Major Mortimer.

"If Caleb had good winds, he reached the city this morning, and to-morrow my father will return, and he will learn the fearful truth that I did not kill Major Mortimer.

"Ah me! the whole horizon now seems black with clouds to me, when but yesterday all was so bright," and seating himself at the window Percy Wyndham gazed out upon the lake, whose waves were rippled by a light breeze that fanned, yet did not cool his burning brow, for bitter remorse began to enter his soul at the manner in which he had treated his mother, though it was to shield her from the world as a murderer.

"I have acted for the best; but good God! what if she go really mad, and become a maniac?"

The thought was so horrible to contemplate, that, stung with remorse, he buried his face in his hands to shut out the picture his imagination had drawn and groaned in agony of spirit.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TWO YACHTS.

I WILL now return to the yacht, whose running out to the Gulf had attracted the attention of Major Mark Mortimer, who had recognized in it the form of his old-time friend and later enemy, Captain Percy Wyndham, who had, to punish him for his faithless conduct, called him out, and given him a wound which had so nearly proven fatal to him.

Little dreaming that the man he was going to seek, to a second time demand a meeting upon the field of honor, was then gazing calmly at him from the forest clad shore, Captain Wyndham held on his way, his hand on the carved tiller of the swift sailing yacht, while his crew, of two negroes, lay forward half asleep.

A man of superb physical proportions, Captain Percy Wyndham also possessed a face that was full of nobleness, though now it was dark and stern, for only the night before had he heard the dread secret which his lovely wife had so long kept from him.

The Mexican attorney having arrived at Lakelands when its master was away with his son, had seen Mrs. Wyndham, and then she knew that no longer could the secret be kept, for affairs in Mexico had undergone a change, and properties that would come to her son when he became of age, were left for her signature under her former married name, that of Nina Mortimer, as the relative leaving the property had left it to her child, and he knew her then as Mrs. Mortimer, and having lived since in South America, had held no communication with his kindred, and was not aware of what changes had taken place.

Mrs. Wyndham was tempted to give up, in

her son's name, all claims to the inheritance, and still keep the secret; but then she determined to confess all, and this she did, to her husband, who, though shocked, readily forgave her, and allowed the Mexican attorney to depart with no idea that he had just discovered that his wife had before been married, as she had supposed.

But he swore to avenge the wrongs she had suffered from Mark Mortimer, and, as the reader has seen, sent old Toby the following day to ask an interview with the master of The Everglades.

Believing that Toby had told him the truth, he had set sail for New Orleans, little dreaming that his wife was determined to herself avenge the wrong, and not allow him to risk his life against one who was wholly cruel to man and woman, and as merciless as he was cruel.

Having gained an offing, Captain Wyndham headed his yacht for New Orleans, and sat brooding over the past, and treasuring up with real joy the revenge he would bring upon the man whom he had found so utterly false.

In the long ago, when Mark Mortimer and Percy Wyndham were boys, they had loved each other as brothers, and the affection increased with their years, until there came between them the fair face of Belle Linton.

Then the serpent in the nature of Mark Mortimer had shown itself, and by falsehood he had won from Percy Wyndham the one being of his love.

To his credit be it said, however, for he was no coward, he had faced the consequences boldly, and nearly lost his life in his duel with his former friend.

Then, though little dreaming it, when he won and pretended to wed the Mexican beauty, Nina Valjos, he had again struck at the heart and honor of that friend, but only discovered it when, after years of absence, Captain Wyndham had returned to Lakelands with his wife, the very woman he had so wronged.

All these things did Captain Wyndham brood over as his fleet craft sped along, and it was no wonder that he clinched the tiller hard and muttered:

"There can only be rest for me, and mine, ay, and honor, when Mark Mortimer is in his grave.

"Then that secret will be forever buried, and he being dead, Nina is truly my wife."

A perfect seaman, Captain Wyndham mechanically sailed his little yacht, it seemed, for his thoughts were too bitter and gloomy to allow him to think of his work.

But he took advantage of every fresh puff, kept his bow well pointed and seemed to sail by instinct rather than habit.

"There's a sail away in-shore, Dot; can you make her out?" suddenly asked Captain Wyndham of one of his negro crew.

"Don't see her, massa."

"I doesn't nuther," were the replies of the ebony sailors, whose eyes did not seem to be as good as were their master's.

"There, right in the shadow of that headland, I see a sail."

"Thar's suthin' thar, that's sartin," said Dot, straining his eyes to their utmost.

"Yes, an' it hain't a very nice place ter meet comp'ny, master, they does say," answered Philip, the second negro.

"Why not, Phil?"

"They do say thet thar is pirates in them waters, sah."

"Well, we are not game enough for buccaneers, so we are safe."

"Don't know, master, fer pirates is awful critters, an' folks does say as how they shows no mercy ter man or woman, white or black," said Dot, who, with all the other negroes along the coast, had a holy horror of the buccaneers of the Gulf, who were then doing considerable damage to the merchant craft trading on the southern coast and at South American ports.

Captain Wyndham made no reply, but held on his course unswervingly.

He knew the shores well, and but a couple of leagues from land, he felt his ability to seek a refuge should any vessel of a suspicious character come near.

His yacht, the Glide, was most appropriately named, for it seemed to glide through the waters at a pace one would not expect obtainable from the light breeze then blowing.

It was a pretty craft of fifteen tons, with a small cabin, handsomely fitted up, and large enough for four persons, and a thoroughly seaworthy boat. Captain Wyndham had often

used her as a conveyance to and from New Orleans, or rather to a point on the lake a few miles from the Crescent City.

As the negroes seemed worked up by their fears of pirates, who years before had had their haunts upon the very point of land under which their master had seen the sail, they kept a bright lookout, and it was not long before they also discovered the white canvas of a small craft, relieved against the dark-green background of foliage.

"Massa, that am a sail, sah," said Dot.

"So I knew, Dot, half an hour ago."

"Yer is right, sah, it am a sail," put in Phil.

"Well, do you make her out, boys?"

"Not adzactly, sah."

"She am a sloop an' carries a heap o' canvas, while she goes along pretty sweet-like, consid'rin' ther breeze are off-shore an' she don't git ther full of it."

"So I think, Dot," and Captain Wyndham called for his glass and leveled it at the distant sail.

"It is a yacht."

"Yes, massa."

"A trifle larger than this craft, and I see five persons on board."

"Does you know her, sah?"

"No, she is a stranger."

"Massa, I knows that craft, sah!" suddenly broke in Phil, who had been making a telescope of his fists.

"What is it, Phil?"

"Yer has heerd o' ther smuggler yacht Jack-o'-lantern, sah?"

"Yes, and would give much to capture it, for it dodges all the Government cruisers sent after it on this coast."

"So it do, sah; but that are ther same craft, sah."

"The Jack-o'-lantern, Phil?"

"Yes, sah."

"Are you sure?"

"I is, massa."

"How do you know, Phil?"

"Yer see, sah, I were cook on ther cutter afore you comed back to the plantation, and we chased that craft often, I kin tell you, sah."

"I knows him by ther swallow-tail stern, ther long bow-sprit, raking mast and how low ther hull lies in ther water."

"That's the craft, sah."

"Well, Phil, it seems to be bound the same way that we are, and if he can outsail the Glide I will be deceived, while, if I see no more men on board than the five now visible, I shall try to carry him, for it will be a feather in our cap to capture the smuggler craft," and Captain Wyndham seemed almost to forget his brooding in the enthusiasm of the gallant sailor that came over him.

"We'll get a bullet in our head," muttered Phil, while Dot said, dolefully, yet too low for his master to hear:

"I doesn't want no feather in my cap."

It was evident that the crew of the Glide felt sorry that they had spoken of the smuggler, and were not anxious to risk life and limb in her capture.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MYSTERIOUS CRAFT.

THE Glide still held on her course, and as it was evident that she was gaining, upon the strange craft, Captain Wyndham ordered all the sail set that could draw, and she began at once to creep up rapidly.

The stranger seeing this, and also from the setting of extra canvas that it was evidently the intention of the Glide to get to closer quarters, also spread more sail, and seemed inclined to avoid her.

The wind, however, was off-shore; and the heavy forest of pines and rocks kept the breeze out of her sails, so that the Glide rapidly gained.

For a moment the conduct of the sailing-master of the strange craft seemed vacillating, for he went about, as though to sail back over his own course, and then once more headed to the westward ere he had gone a cable's length.

Then he stood further off-shore, as though to get better wind, and the Glide still gaining, he put in shore, and held this course for some minutes, when he once more kept to his old course.

"That fellow manuevers most strangely, Dot, whatever he may be," said Captain Wyndham, struck with the strange tactics of the stranger.

"She do, sah, fer a fact."

The Skeleton Schooner.

"Guess he don't want our 'quaintance,'" were the comments of the two negroes.

But he shall know us better, boys, whatever he may be.

"Have you seen more than the five men on her deck?"

"No, sah."

"One is a white man?"

"Yes, sah."

"And the others are negroes, so that would indicate some plantation yacht."

"That are so, massa, but it do look more and more like the Jack-o'-lantern, sah."

"Well, we shall soon see, for the Glide catches the breeze well, which he does not, and we will pass within a few fathoms of him."

Phil and Dot both looked as though they were of the opinion that they would rather not get any nearer, but they knew whatever their master set his mind upon he would carry out, if in his power, and they wisely held their peace.

"Are you sure, Phil, that is the Jack-o'-lantern?" asked Captain Wyndham, as the Glide had overhauled the stranger, until they were only a few cable-lengths apart.

"Yas, sah, that am the identical craft, as I hopes for glory when I dies," firmly answered Phil.

The two yachts were now sailing upon a parallel course, and though a good cable's length apart, if the Glide continued to gain as she was then doing, she must pass within ten fathoms of the other, and so near that the stranger must naturally take the wind out of her sails as she went by, for the other craft was further in-shore, from which direction the wind came.

It was now nearly sunset, and the slanting rays of the declining orb fell upon both yachts, revealing every outline and rope distinctly.

The strange yacht was certainly a beautiful craft from hull to truck, and glided through the water with stately ease, though not as rapidly as her model and rig would give indication of, for she seemed built to go, and carried a vast spread of canvas, even more than did the Glide; but had the breeze been stronger she would have doubtless dropped the little vessel from Lakelands with ease.

Upon her decks every coil of rope was in its place, and all was neat and ship-shape.

Her crew of four men, whose black faces indicated the African, were forward, lazily watching the Glide, while her master sat in the cockpit, his hand upon the tiller.

He was a white man, with heavy beard, and dressed in sailor garb.

As the Glide slowly overhauled the stranger a silence rested upon both crews, until the small yacht had crept up until her sharp bowsprit was even with the stern of the larger yacht.

Then Captain Wyndham began to bring his vessel closer to the wind, and seeing it, the helmsman of the stranger yacht did likewise, until it became a question of which could point closer into the wind's eye.

But the sails of the stranger shivered first, and he was compelled to keep off a point and hold her at that, while the Glide, with her mainsail as flat as a board, could still keep two points nearer the wind, a circumstance which, if her master did not change his course, in a few minutes would lay the bows of his vessel alongside the other craft.

This the master of the stranger saw, and called out angrily:

"Ho, there! do you intend to run me aboard?"

"What yacht is that?" asked Captain Wyndham, in clear, sailor-like tones.

"The Jack-o'-lantern," came back the cry.

"Didn't I done tol' yer so, massa?" cried Philip, *sotto voce*.

"Ha! the smuggler craft of that name?" said Captain Wyndham.

"Yes, the smuggler craft that was, but now under a different master."

"Ah! she was captured then?"

"Yes, two weeks ago in Mobile bay, and I bought her—look out, sir, or you'll be into me."

"No, I shall not touch you, sir; but I am obliged for your information, for I was told by one of my men it was the smuggler Jack-o'-lantern, and intended making an effort to take you," was the bold reply of Captain Wyndham, though delivered with courtesy.

"You are willing to take great chances, sir," said the other, with a smile.

"True, but the game would have been

well worth the risk, for I am Percy Wyndham, late a captain in the navy, and well know the value my Government puts on the smugglers of this coast."

"Indeed! I have heard of you, Captain Wyndham."

"Allow me to introduce myself as Frank Forrester of New Orleans, an amateur yachtsman and seeker after sport generally."

"Do you head for New Orleans?"

"I do, sir."

"I have rooms at number Ten St. Charles,

and will be glad to see you there."

"Thank you, sir, and should you cruise near

Lakelands plantation at any time, I will be

pleased to entertain you."

"Good-evening, sir, and a pleasant time,"

and Captain Wyndham raised his hat politely.

The yachtsman returned the salute, and the Glide having forged ahead, the two vessels were soon quite a distance apart, and were soon lost to the sight of each other by the shades of night.

The wind increasing, the Glide went bounding merrily along, and at dawn was within a league of her anchorage.

"Massa, 'fore God, sah, does yer see dat craft at anchor, yonder in de harbor?" suddenly cried Phil, addressing his master who had remained at the helm all night.

Captain Wyndham glanced quickly in the direction indicated, and beheld a vessel which caused him to fairly start, while he said earnestly:

"By Heaven! it is the counterpart of the yacht we passed last night."

"It am de Jack-o'-lantern, sah."

"It cannot be, Phil."

"Yas it am, massa," put in Dot firmly.

"Well, we shall soon know."

The Glide held on to her anchorage, and let go her hook within a length of the stranger.

"It is certainly the craft," said Captain Wyndham, but he was surprised to see that it lay at anchor with sails furled, and that there was not a sign of life on board.

Going ashore in his dory the captain asked a fisherman:

"My man, when did that craft come in?"

"Last night, some time, sur."

"What yacht is it?"

"It were the smuggler craft, Lantern, but she got took some weeks ago, and she were bought by one o' our fancy city sports they say."

"But I passed her yesterday at sunset, sixty miles from here, and outsailed her fairly, and now I find her at anchor here."

"It are a mysterious craft, sur, so we all says."

"But where are her crew?"

"Dunno, sur; ther cap'n told me to keep a eye on her."

"Well, I cannot account for it," and Captain Wyndham walked off to the little inn near by to get a conveyance to carry him into the city, distant four miles, where he intended to accept the invitation of Mr. Frank Forrester, and learn how it was he had so easily beaten the Glide to her anchorage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FATEFUL LETTER.

UPON reaching the city, Captain Wyndham sought the hotel where he was wont to put up when in New Orleans, and after breakfast sent his card to Major Mark Mortimer, whom he knew always stopped at the same house.

To his surprise the waiter returned with the information that the major was not in the city.

Rising from the breakfast-table, Captain Wyndham sought the clerk and asked:

"Is there not some mistake about Major Mortimer not being here?"

The clerk had heard of the old-time affair between the Wyndhams and Mortimers, and seemed surprised that the captain should ask for his enemy; but he responded politely:

"No, sir, the major is not here."

"He always stops with you, does he not?"

"He does, sir, whenever he is in the city."

"Strange, for they said at The Everglades he had left for New Orleans."

"He has not arrived then."

"I left long after he did, and with a fair wind came over in good time."

"His son arrived this morning, Captain Wyndham."

"But not the father?"

"No, sir."

"This is strange indeed."

"Toby could not have made a mistake, and have asked for the young man instead of his father," muttered Captain Wyndham.

Then turning to the clerk, he again asked:

"Where is Mr. Mark Mortimer?"

"In his room, sir, at breakfast with a friend."

"Will you kindly send up and ask him if he left his father at The Everglades, or whether he is expected in the city?"

"Say a gentleman would like to know, only mention no name."

The servant went on his errand, and returned with the information from Mark Mortimer that his father was at The Everglades, and would not be in the city for two weeks; but if the gentleman was a friend of his father's, to come up and join him at breakfast.

Captain Wyndham turned away with a look of disappointment upon his face, and sauntered forth to attend to some business affairs he thought it best to arrange while he was in town.

The business detained him the greater part of the day, and when he returned to the hotel he was surprised to find a large and excited crowd assembled there.

As he entered a dread silence fell upon all, and every eye was turned upon him, as several recognized him and his name was spoken, while there came the low words:

"There he comes now!"

He gave a slight start, and his face paled, as he saw one of his own negroes, haggard and weary-looking, standing by the office awaiting him, a letter in his hand; but before he could speak to him a tall, fine-looking man, with heavy beard, stepped forward and addressed him.

It was the helmsman of the strange yacht, but no longer in his pea-jacket and duck pants, but dressed in the height of fashion, and with the elegant manners of a courtier.

"We meet again, Captain Wyndham, and I must beg to see you in your room, as I bear an important letter to you," he said with a pleasant smile.

"Ah yes, it is Mr. Forrester; but you will pardon me just now, as I see here one of my slaves, and I fear ill tidings from home," and Captain Wyndham passed on with a bow and eagerly reached forth his hand for the letter Caleb held forth to him, with a remark that caused him to dread the worst.

"Oh massa, dey wants you at home bad, sah."

Captain Wyndham broke the seal with a hand as firm as iron, and with a hundred pairs of eyes upon him.

Though his eyes were blurred by anxiety he read:

"LAKELANDS, Tuesday.

"FATHER:—

"Return at once with all dispatch, as I shot Major Mark Mortimer in a duel to-day, and the shock has prostrated mother."

PERCY."

Clinching the few fateful lines in his hand, Captain Wyndham asked calmly for the key of his room, and walked away, followed by the faithful Caleb, and one other.

That other was Mr. Frank Forrester, wearing the same smile upon his handsome face, and which seemed to be called there to hide other feelings.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHALLENGE.

ONCE in his room, away from the gaze of the crowd, and Captain Wyndham turned to the negro, and said in a trembling voice:

"Oh, Caleb! what does this mean?"

"Massa! 'fore God I is sorry, sah; but I were at the beach gettin' ready ter fish, when Uncle Toby comes down in a run, sah, and he says:

"Caleb, Mars' Percy hab kilt Major Mortimer in a duel for 'sultin' missus, an' he are layin' dead up at ther Magnolia Arbor now, with a bullet in his fo'head."

"An' Mars' Percy says he wants yer ter take ther Lance, his own yacht, an' sail right straight ter Orleans, an' car' this letter ter massa."

"I tuk ther letter, massa, an' me an' Ben comed right over, sah, fer we hed good wind; but when we run out inter deep water I seen ther Quickstep, the major's yacht, runnin' along under all sail, an' in her two niggers same as we was."

"When we headed fer Orleans, they wasn't far away, and I seen it were Tony and Peter, an' they hails us an' says they was goin' ter tell Mars' Mark o' ther awful tidin's, an' they beat us ober, sah, some two hours, an' ther news hev spread consid'ble," but in making this latter as

sertion Caleb did not tell his master that he had spread the news more than anybody else.

"This is fearful, for now my poor son must know all," said Captain Wyndham, as he paced the room.

A moment after he said:

"Come, Caleb, let us get home at once, for I am calm now."

The negro seized the carpet-sack of his master, and started toward the door, just as a knock came.

"Come in!" called out the captain sternly.

The door opened, and in stepped the elegant form of Frank Forrester.

"Pardon me, Captain Wyndham, but—" began the visitor in his suave manner, but Captain Wyndham interrupted with:

"Ah! yes, you said you wished to see me, sir; but I have just been the recipient of very sad tidings from home, and must beg that you excuse me, as I start at once on my return."

"But, sir, it is absolutely necessary that I see you at once."

"And I say nothing is so important to me as to go at once to those who need me," returned Captain Wyndham, with some asperity of manner.

"And pardon me again, sir, but my communication is equally as important, for it comes from one who seeks redress of you."

"Who is it, sir?" asked Captain Wyndham, with surprise.

"Mr. Mark Mortimer."

"That boy demand redress of me, sir?" sneered Captain Wyndham, his face flushing with anger.

"It seems, sir, that your boy, as you are pleased to apply that term to my friend, who is the senior of your boy, has just killed the father of Mr. Mark Mortimer, and this it is the intention of my friend to avenge."

"Then he must abide my time, sir," was the haughty reply.

"But he is anxious to return to his home, as he has received communications calling him thither at once, and demands a meeting with you before he goes, so what shall I tell my friend?"

"Tell your friend and my foe, Mr. Mark Mortimer, to go to the devil," and Captain Wyndham strode from the room, leaving Mr. Forrester gazing after him in a kind of dumb amazement, which had, for the time being, driven the perpetual smile from his face.

CHAPTER XX.

THE THREAT.

MR. FRANK FORRESTER was a man of the world, and seldom was it that he could be thrown off his very equal balance.

But it must be confessed that he was considerably nonplussed by the very cavalier manner in which Captain Percy Wyndham had commissioned him to tell his friend, Mark Mortimer, to seek his Satanic Majesty.

As soon as he recovered his usual suavity of manner he turned on his heel and went whistling down the corridor of the hotel until he reached room number thirteen.

Here he paused, and a knock was answered by an invitation to enter.

He found himself in a large and handsomely furnished parlor, with a bedroom attached, and it held but one occupant, who was pacing the room with anxious step and careworn face.

It was a young man who was just twenty-one, yet looked older, as there rested upon his face the indelible stamp of dissipation.

His face was a strikingly handsome one, however, though not wholly frank and honest, and his form was one envied by many an awkward youth who knew him.

He was dressed almost flashily, yet looked the gentleman withal, and his manner was haughty, in fact overbearing to all who were not his equals.

One glance into his face showed such a resemblance to the late Major Mortimer, that no one could fail to recognize in him the son of that gentleman.

"Well, Forrester, what tidings?" he asked quickly, as his friend entered.

"He declines to meet you now."

"Declines to meet me?" was the surprised question.

"Now, he does."

"What did he say?"

"He told me to tell you to go to the devil, Mark."

"By Heaven! he sent me that word?" and the face of the youth flushed with temper.

"Yes, but I felt assured you would not

oblige him; but joking aside, Mortimer, he said he was going to return to his home, and in fact started while I was there, and simply hinted that he was at your service at another time."

"Then I start home too."

"So soon?"

"Yes, for I had not time to explain fully to you the news I received."

"It seems that—but I will read you the letter of my friend Morgan Massey, and which he sent by two of my slaves in my father's yacht, Quickstep."

"Here it is."

He took from his pocket a letter and read aloud as follows:

THE EVERGLADES.

"MY DEAR PERCY:—

"I am pained to have to make known to you sad tidings from home, to the effect that your good father fought a duel, without seconds, an hour ago, with young Wyndham, and was shot dead."

"The cause of the quarrel I do not know; but, with my father, coming upon the scene, we found the major dead, and lying by his side in a swoon Mrs. Wyndham, while near by was Percy, her son."

"There were also two of the Lakelands slaves there, and all I learned was that Percy Wyndham had slain your father."

"I came on to The Everglades and broke the news to your sister, who fell in a faint, and is still her nurse tells me seriously ill; but I have sent for your physician, and now hasten to get this off to you, urging your immediate return."

"Yours,

MORGAN MASSEY."

"P. S.—My father has just come to the mansion with the body, and says that Duke, the major's valet, attacked young Wyndham, but received a wound that may prove fatal."

"Father says Duke was driven mad with grief and a desire for revenge he thinks."

"The doctor is here, and we will do all in our power until your arrival."

MORGAN."

"You will go at once, Mark?" asked Frank Forrester.

"Certainly, and I beg you to accompany me."

"Willingly, so I will call your servant, order a carriage and drive to the lake, and we may have a race with Captain Wyndham," answered Forrester, as pleasantly as though he was going on a pleasure excursion, and not to a house of mourning.

"If we overhaul his craft I swear by heaven he shall meet me, for I would like to feel that I had avenged my poor father ere I looked upon his dead face."

"I tell you, Forrester, the major was a dead shot, quick as lightning, and I believe there was underhand work used against him."

"It would seem so, especially as there were no seconds," chimed in Frank Forrester.

"Well, I'll sift the matter to the dregs and revenge my father, I swear to you," said the young man, with almost savage earnestness.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE JACK-O'-LANTERN.

"MASSA, there comes that Lantern yacht, sah, for they is settin' sail."

The remark came from Dot, one of the negro sailors on the yacht of Captain Wyndham, and was addressed to his master, who sat at the helm of his vessel, which was a little over a league from where it had dropped anchor that very morning.

It was just sunset, but back in the little harbor among the fishing smacks was visible the handsome craft known as the Jack-o'-lantern, and she was just heading out into open water almost in the wake of Captain Wyndham's vessel.

Astern of the yacht came the Lance, in which was Caleb and his negro comrade, who had brought the fateful letter to their master, and not far off her starboard quarter could be seen the Quickstep, the favorite craft of the dead major, and which also had flown to New Orleans with the tidings of death and sorrow at The Everglades.

They were certainly four beautiful vessels, and under the pressure of an eight-knot breeze were bowing along, the three in advance sailing about equal in speed, but the Jack-o'-lantern astern creeping up rapidly.

But Captain Wyndham seemed in no humor for the beauty of the scene, gilded by the glories of sunset, as he sat at the tiller, his face dark, stern and even hard in its expression of anger and grief commingled.

He clutched the carved tiller with a force that made it quiver, and eyed his course ahead as though longing to fly swiftly away and solve the mysteries yet hidden from him in his own home.

At last the glory of day died upon the waters and night cast its shadow over all, causing the yachts to look like specter vessels gliding through the gloom and over the waves.

With the darkness the wind slightly increased, and the dew dampening the sails helped the speed of the little vessels considerably, and the pace and scene would have given joy to most hearts, as the four yachts were now clumped together within the space of a quarter of a mile square.

Captain Wyndham yet led, with the Lance on his starboard and the Quickstep on his port quarter, while the Jack-o'-lantern was coming on-dead astern at a slapping pace, which diminished the distance each moment between her and her leaders.

As the darkness came on, in spite of his grief and gloomy thoughts, Captain Wyndham's sailor eye detected a marked peculiarity in the yacht Jack-o'-lantern.

In the daylight he had observed her sails were a peculiar color, for they were neither white or weather-stained, but of a misty hue that was indescribable.

Her hull also, instead of being white or black, was of the same remarkable shade, and when darkness settled upon the face of the deep the effect was observable at once, for the beautiful vessel would hardly have been visible at all, where the others were in full view, had it not been for a greenish-red lantern that hung upon the very end of her bow-sprit.

This light was plainly visible, and to an ordinary observer would have appeared to be indeed a Jack-o'-lantern floating over the face of the deep.

Having observed this peculiarity, and which he saw, connected with the vessel's former career and the recent tragedy, caused the negroes to feel a superstitious dread of her, Captain Wyndham kept his eyes fixed upon the strange craft, and soon noticed, that although she was within a few cable lengths she yet was seen most indistinctly.

"Why has that craft followed me, unless it bears aboard of it young Mortimer, determined to force me to a meeting with him?" said Captain Wyndham to himself, as he watched the yacht drawing closer and closer to him.

"It is a strange craft, and that man Forrester handles her well, and I would like to solve the mystery of her beating me to port yesterday, for it is most remarkable that he did so."

"Who her commander is few seemed to know, for all I could learn of him to-day was that he possessed plenty of money, spent his time between New Orleans and Mobile, and was a great yachtsman, while he was also a most successful gambler.

"I suppose Young Mortimer has gotten him to come with him to The Everglades to be his second, for I feel confident the young hot-blood will push the affair with me, and I will be more than content, as he is a dead shot like his father, and I would dislike exceedingly to have Percy exposed a second time to the danger of a meeting on the field."

"Ah me! after many years, Mark Mortimer, your crimes against me and poor Nina, have been punished by our son."

Thus mused the unhappy man as he sailed on, until the sea began to grow lighter and lighter, and far away over the waters appeared a ball of molten gold rising from the dark depths.

"There comes the moon, and I will see what effect its light has on the sails and hull of that strange craft," said Captain Wyndham.

Waiting until the moon rode well above the horizon, he glanced astern.

The Jack-o'-lantern had crept steadily up until she was now abreast of the Quickstep and Lance, which the yacht of Captain Wyndham had slightly gained on, and the beautiful little vessels were coming along together.

But, to his surprise, the effect of the moonlight upon the line of the hull and sails of the Jack-o'-lantern, were to make them only a little more distinct than before.

Brightly the sails of the lance and Quickstep shone out, and their dark hulls were plainly visible, but the craft between them looked almost like a phantom, gliding over the waters like the ghost of a departed vessel.

"That is remarkable indeed, but he holds directly in my wake, and although my yacht is doing her best, he is gaining rapidly, and I will soon have a close look at her," said Captain Wyndham; but little he knew what that close look would end with.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ACCEPTANCE.

It was a strange sight, yet a pretty one, to see those four beautiful yachts sailing together over the moonlit waters of Mississippi Sound, and strange circumstances had called them together.

In the leading craft was one who long years ago had fought a duel with, and wounded a man whom his own son had just killed, or was supposed to have killed, while just in the wake of his own vessel came the son of the dead man, hunting down, not the slayer of his father, but his father's old-time foe.

The two other yachts contained the negro messengers from each plantation, and upon one thought was every mind, black and white, which the excitement of the race had no charm for.

Nearer and nearer crept the Jack-o'-lantern, until the lantern on her long bowsprit hovered over the head of Captain Wyndham as he sat at the tiller of his own craft.

Did she continue the same speed at which she was then sailing, a moment more would force her sharp bows over the stern of the Lakelands yacht.

But a low order from the one who held the helm, the black crew veered, and mysteriously the speed of the craft was checked, until it held just even with the vessel which it has so cleverly overhauled.

This circumstance did not escape the eyes of Captain Wyndham, who observed it, without directly accounting for it, and it brought to his mind the mysterious fact that he had outsailed the Jack-o'-lantern on the trip in to New Orleans, but found her at anchor in the lake harbor when he got there.

When the Jack-o'-lantern's speed had been reduced to that of the vessel leading her, Captain Wyndham saw Frank Forrester coming forward.

"A pleasant night, Captain Wyndham," he said, pleasantly.

"I had not observed it, sir; but now that you draw my mind to it, it certainly is a beautiful evening," answered Captain Wyndham, in an absent kind of way.

"Your yacht sails well, sir," continued Mr. Forrester.

"Not so well as does yours, it seems."

"Ah, yes, I have a good craft; but pardon me, sir, if I recall the object of my visit to you to the hotel this afternoon."

"What was that, sir?"

"I came on the part of my friend, Mr. Mark Mortimer."

"Ah, yes, and I declined to meet him until another time."

"True; but he is with me here in the boat, and demands that the meeting shall not be put off."

"If I understand aright, Mr. Forrester, I am the challenged party."

"Yes, sir."

"Then I certainly have the choice of time and weapons, as both yourself and Mr. Mortimer should know, if you are not wholly ignorant of the code," said Captain Wyndham, calmly.

"I believe my young friend understands the code, sir, or he should, as a Southern gentleman, not be ignorant of it; as for myself, you having referred to me also, some score or two of affairs of honor, in which I have been unfortunately engaged, have made me most familiar with all the laws of dueling."

This was said with the same smile he was wont to wear, and with no appearance of braggadocio.

"Then, sir, I will select my own time and place, for, when I get to Lakelands, I may find that it will be as necessary to meet Mr. Mortimer as my son found it to meet his father."

"I beg, sir, that you will change your course of sailing, as the one I now am on is mine."

Frank Forrester made no reply, but, bowing, returned to the stern of his vessel, where Mark Mortimer was lounging in an easy-chair, a cigar between his teeth.

"Well, Frank?" he asked, indolently.

"He says he will select his own time."

"But he shall select mine," was the haughty reply.

"But he has the code on his side."

"Curse the code! Did his son go by the code when he fought and killed my father without seconds?"

"We do not know all about that affair yet, Frank."

"I know sufficient to make me force a meeting with Wyndham, for, if I go back with him dead, I shall have avenged my father."

"Come, tell him he shall fight me now, or I will post him as a coward, and refuse ever to meet him again."

Mr. Forrester was an intensely obliging man where it suited his humor to be, and he at once rose and walked forward once more.

"Do you intend to alter the course of your craft, sir?" sternly asked Captain Wyndham, who had been observing him by the bright moonlight.

"That is of minor importance, Captain Wyndham, for the question to be decided now is whether you will grant my friend a meeting."

"By Heaven! you seem determined to force this matter upon me."

"We do, sir."

"When?"

"To-night."

"And I refuse."

"Then Mr. Mortimer begs me to say that he will post you as a coward, and as such he cannot grant you a meeting in the future."

Captain Wyndham turned livid.

Thrice he attempted to speak, yet could not; but after a moment mastered his emotion and said:

"Mr. Forrester, against Major Mark Mortimer I had bitter cause of quarrel, and I went to New Orleans to find him and demand a meeting, for I believed he was in the city."

"Now news has reached me that he has fallen by the hand of my son, and I feel that there was some plot arranged by Major Mortimer, but that he fell into his own pitfall."

"But I am going now to see just how matters stand, and then I will be wholly at the service of Mr. Mortimer, whose anxiety to follow in the footsteps of his father I shall do my best to gratify."

"But my friend refuses to wait."

"He certainly does not expect us to fight here?"

"He does, sir."

"How?"

"On my vessel, which I can lay to for the meeting."

"But it is not according to the code."

"We admit that, Captain Wyndham, but thought you would grant an exception in this case, as the duel between your son and Major Mortimer was not according to the code."

This was a home thrust, and Captain Wyndham said quickly:

"Under those circumstances, I accept the challenge of Mr. Mortimer, sir, and let the duel be fought at once."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHAT THE MOON SHONE DOWN ON.

HAVING gained the acceptance of Captain Wyndham to a hostile meeting with his friend, Mr. Frank Forrester said politely:

"As soon as I have conveyed your decision, Captain Wyndham, to my friend, and learned his wishes fully in the matter, I shall return and offer my services to you, as, under the circumstances, I shall have to act as your second as well, if you accept me."

"Certainly, sir, for, as you see, I have only my negroes with me, and I thank you for your kindness."

Frank Forrester returned to the stern of his vessel once more.

"Well?"

"He accepts."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"What weapons?"

"That I have to yet learn from him, as soon as I know what you prefer."

"Pistols, of course, for he has the reputation of having been the finest swordsman in the navy."

"Then pistols it must be."

"If he does not refuse."

"I will arrange that, for my little scheme must be carried out well, as I am the second of both gentlemen."

"I am in your hands, Forrester."

"And I will pull you through, my dear boy, for I cannot afford to lose you."

"Ten paces I suppose will suit you?" and Mr. Forrester smiled as blandly as though he had asked him to have a cigar.

"Yes, suit yourself, and you will suit me."

"Thank you."

"Now for a chat with my other friend," and Mr. Forrester walked forward once more.

With a light bound he sprung upon the stern of the yacht in advance, and coolly took a seat by the side of Captain Wyndham.

"Now, my dear captain, I am at your service, to learn your wishes in the matter."

"Swords, sir, as the rolling of the vessel may somewhat destroy our aim, and I mean this to be a thorough settlement between Mr. Mark Mortimer and myself."

"I regret to say aught against it, my dear Captain Wyndham, but you have ever been famous as a swordsman while my other friend is but indifferent in the use of a blade."

"Then let it be pistols, sir."

"That is better."

"At what distance?"

"Ten paces."

"A good distance, and as my yacht is very deep, she will lay comparatively easy upon the water, and she can be the ground."

"No, sir, I shall remain upon my own vessel."

"But, sir, how—"

"I will tell you how it can be fought."

"I am all attention, sir."

"The two yachts, your vessel and mine, can lay to, ten paces apart."

"I can stand upon the starboard quarter of my vessel, Mr. Mortimer upon the port quarter of your craft, and you can give the word to fire."

"A good plan, Captain Wyndham: but have you your weapons?"

"I have, sir."

Calling to the negro Dot he told him to bring him his pistol-case from the cabin, and opening it, he exhibited the two superb weapons nestled away in their velvet couches.

"They are certainly beautiful, sir."

"They are as true as they are beautiful."

"Ah! you have tried them then, dear captain."

"Yes, with that one I wounded Major Mortimer years ago."

"I will use this one to-night."

He took the weapon he last referred to from its case, and handed it to Mr. Forrester, who said quietly:

"With your permission I will borrow the other weapon for Mr. Mortimer, as I do not like his pistols, and mine I never lend."

"Certainly, sir."

The yacht was then brought up into the wind and lay to, and Mark Mortimer, who held the helm of the Jack-o'-lantern, at a word from Forrester very skillfully laid the vessel almost alongside, and the two pretty crafts were lying almost motionless upon the waters.

The Quickstep and Lance were then hailed and ordered to lay to, as Mr. Forrester said blandly:

"Although negro testimony is not taken in court, captain, it is well to have witnesses who can be believed by their owners."

"Come, boys, Captain Wyndham and Mr. Mark Mortimer are going to settle a difficulty between them by a hostile meeting, and we wish you for lookers on."

There was dead silence among the negroes, and then, having loaded both weapons before Captain Wyndham, Mr. Forrester sprung into the yacht's dory and rowed a couple of boat's lengths to the Jack-o'-lantern.

He carried with him the second pistol belonging to Captain Wyndham, and leading Mark Mortimer to the stern of the yacht, placed him against the bulwark on the port side.

In the mean time Captain Wyndham had taken his stand opposite to his adversary and upon the starboard quarter of his craft.

"Have you any requests to make of me, Captain Wyndham?" asked Mr. Forrester kindly, as he stood on the deck of the Jack-o'-lantern, a few feet from Mark Mortimer.

"Before leaving for New Orleans, sir, I made all arrangements necessary, thank you, to meet anything that might arise in case of my death," was the calm reply.

"Then there is nothing else that you would say?"

"Yes; if I fall, be good enough to break the news to my wife and son."

"That is all, sir; thank you."

Mr. Forrester bowed and then turned to Mark Mortimer.

"And you, Mr. Mortimer, how can I serve you in case this duel should go against you?"

"Tell my sister that I died in the endeavor to avenge the death of my father."

"Mr. Mortimer seems to forget that it was

not by my hand that his father fell, yet I am perfectly willing to assume the responsibility of my son's actions," quietly said Captain Wyndham, and turning to his faithful negroes, he said a few words in a low tone.

Then they moved further forward, and crouching down, awaited in breathless silence and suspense the result.

It was a weird, silent, thrilling scene, with the two yachts, upon which stood the duelists, lying only a few feet apart, the men, pistols in hand, facing each other, the tall form of Frank Forrester amidships upon the bulwarks of the Jack-o'-lantern, and the crews of the two vessels crouching forward, while the Quickstep and the Lance, with their negro sailors, lay further off upon the moonlit waters, awaiting the dread end that must come to one or the other of the two who confronted each other with deadly intent.

Captain Wyndham was calm and stern, Mark Mortimer seemingly indifferent, while Mr. Forrester was smiling and almost cheerful, as though such scenes had a real charm for him.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?" he sung out in the clearest of tones.

Neither spoke, but both duelists bowed assent.

"Fire!" shouted Forrester in trumpet tones.

The pistols flashed together, and one man fell forward into the sea, while the other coolly turned upon his heel and walked forward.

It was Captain Wyndham that fell into the sea, and a wail of woe went up from his slaves at the sight, while Frank Forrester, throwing aside his coat and cap, sprung overboard after him.

Almost instantly, he arose to the surface, the limp form in his strong arms, and called out:

"Here, boys, draw your master on board."

Both Dot and Philip sprung to obey, and the former asked, in a whisper:

"Is he dead, sah?"

"Yes," was the calm reply.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BURIAL.

ONE would have thought that Major Mark Mortimer had been a very popular man while living to judge from the vast concourse of people who assembled to see his body taken to its last resting-place.

But then the circumstances attending his death, his having been killed by a mere boy in years, and the fact that the same hand had severely wounded the huge negro, Duke, who had sought to avenge his master, called together a large number, impelled by curiosity, rather than grief for the dead or sympathy for the living.

The absence of the heir, Mark Mortimer, was severely commented upon, for he had been sent for, and should have been there, the public thought, and not leave his young and lovely sister to the care of strangers in such an hour.

He was known to be wild—ay, fast—but his love for his father no one had doubted, and his high temper and known pluck they felt would cause him to push the affair with Captain Wyndham and his son, for they little dreamed what had then taken place upon the moonlit waters.

The time of burial rolled around at last, and a large *cortege* set out on foot for the family burying-ground of The Everglades—a pretty knoll, covered with cedars and willows, and overlooking the Sound, whose waters rippling upon the shore sung a requiem for the dead who rested upon the hillside.

Leaning heavily upon the arm of Mr. Merton Massey, while her lover—for such Morgan Massey was, whatever she might think of him—followed behind, was Mabel Mortimer.

Her face was heavily veiled, and none could see its marble whiteness and how she suffered; but all felt deeply for her, as it was well known that she had idolized her stern, handsome father.

As the pall-bearers turned into the roadway bordering the beach, and which led to the burying-ground, a trim-looking yacht was visible standing rapidly in toward the shore.

"It is young Mortimer returning," went the whisper through the procession, and hearing it, Mabel raised her veil and glanced seaward.

"No," she said, in a low tone.

"Mark went in his own yacht, Lightning, and that is not his vessel."

So the procession moved on, the clergyman,

bareheaded and in gown, leading, the body following at slow pace, borne by six pall-bearers, and then the mourners and the friends, with a long line of the plantation negroes bringing up the rear.

"There is another yacht far astern of the first one, Mabel."

"Perhaps that is the Lightning," said Mr. Massey.

Again the sail was raised, and after a long look from the tear-dimmed eyes, the maiden answered, while her face slightly flushed:

"No, no; that is the Lakelands yacht."

And on the procession moved, until reaching the brick-walled graveyard it filed slowly in beneath the willows.

Then came the halt and the lowering of the body into the grave, and the silence most intense was broken by the deep tones of the clergyman reading the service for the dead.

But in the mean time the first discovered yacht had altered her course, and from heading in toward the harbor of The Everglades, pointed in the direction of the burying-ground.

The foliage of the trees hid her from those at the grave as she rounded to and lowered a boat, into which sprung two oarsmen and a young man who took the tiller.

Swiftly the boat pulled ashore; the young man sprung out as she grounded upon the beach and walked with rapid step up to the scene of burial.

As he moved through the crowd a hum of voices showed that he was recognized, and just as the last words of the burial service were spoken he stood by the side of Mabel Mortimer, who threw herself into his arms with a low cry.

"Be calm, my sister, for our father is avenged," he said, in low yet distinct tones, that reached many ears.

Those who were throwing in the dirt upon the coffin paused in their work; the clergyman who had just consigned the dust of Major Mortimer to its Maker started in amazement; Mr. Merton Massey gazed in almost horror upon the speaker, while Mabel, holding up her head, asked in a whisper:

"Brother, what do you mean?"

"I mean that our father is avenged, for I killed Captain Percy Wyndham last night in a duel," was the stern reply, and it sent a thrill of horror through all who heard it, for the son of the dead man had slain the one who was guiltless of his father's death.

"Mark Mortimer, do you mean this?" asked his sister, with a sternness one would not have believed of her.

He turned with a reckless smile upon his face, and pointing to the yacht heading toward the Lakelands haven, said:

"Do you see yonder craft?"

"Yes."

"It carries the dead body of Captain Percy Wyndham to his home."

"God have mercy on those who love him."

"Oh, brother! what have you done?" and Mabel Mortimer would have fallen had not her brother caught her in his strong arms, and without a word to any one borne her rapidly back toward the mansion.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FLAG AT HALF-MAST.

A STRANGE fascination held Percy Wyndham to the broad piazza of Lakelands, upon the afternoon when the body of Major Mark Mortimer was being borne to its grave.

The curving shores enabled him to see the funeral *cortege* when it filed out of the forest into the beach highway, and he watched its slow progress until the column disappeared in the shadow of the grove that encircled the burying-ground.

He held in his hand the strong sea-glass of his father, which gave him a good view of the fair and lovely girl who mourned her father's loss, and involuntarily from his lips came the words:

"God pity her."

Then his quick eye discovered the yacht making in-shore, and he saw her change her course and head for a point on the beach near the little graveyard.

"That craft is the image of the Jack-o'-lantern, our cutter chased several times," he said, quickly, and calling to Uncle Toby, who was dozing in a chair at the other end of the piazza, he said, as the old negro approached:

"Uncle Toby, didn't you see the smuggling

craft Jack-o'-lantern once, when you went in the Lance to Mobile?"

"Yes, sah."

"She boarded you, did she not?"

"Yes, sah; mistis was on board goin' over to the city to do some shoppin', and the Jack-o'-lantern sighted us, and altho' we run all we could, she overhauled us; but her cap'n was very polite when he seen a lady on board, so let us go on our way, though folks do say he hain't nothing else than a pirate."

"Well, you would know the craft again if you saw it?"

"Fact, Mars' Percy, fact, for I hain't a play sailor."

"Then look and see what you think of that craft over near The Everglades shore?"

The old negro wiped his spectacles, adjusted them carefully, and took a glance as directed by his young master.

Instantly he started, and said excitedly:

"Mars' Percy, that is the Jack-o'-lantern, sah, I can swear."

"So I believed, Uncle Toby; but what is she doing here?"

"Don't know, sah, 'thout she means mischief; but hain't that another sail, Mars' Percy, headin' in this way?"

"Ah yes, I had not observed her; it is my father's yacht, thank God," excitedly said Percy Wyndham, while Uncle Toby fervently ejaculated:

"Amen!"

After watching the Lakelands yacht for a few moments, Percy Wyndham turned his glass again upon the spot which held a fascination for him, and saw the landing of Mark Mortimer from the little boat.

He had seen him in New Orleans, and met him hunting several times, so recogniz'd him even at that distance, and watched him eagerly as he saw him go up to the burying-ground.

A few moments after he saw him reappear with the form of his sister in his arms, and behind him followed the crowd, evidently greatly excited.

"Something has occurred there, Toby, to cause intense excitement," the young man said anxiously, and he watched the crowd until it disappeared where the path led into the forest, and then saw the Jack o'-lantern stand down toward the harbor of The Everglades.

"Come, Toby, we will go down and meet my father, for the yacht will soon be in," he said.

Rising, he walked down toward the little haven, where the Lakelands boats were wont to anchor, and where a rustic pier put forth from the shore out into deep water.

Reaching the little pavilion at the end of the pier, Percy and Uncle Toby halted, and then the youth gave a violent start, and became deadly pale while he cried:

"Oh, Toby! see there!"

"What is it, Mars' Percy?"

"Look at that flag!"

"Yes, sah, what is the matter with it, sah?"

"It is at half-mast from the peak, Toby."

"So it is, Mars' Percy; but I guess it is a mistake."

"My father is not the man to make such mistakes, Toby; but I think I understand it now."

"Yes, sah?"

"He sees the funeral procession yonder, and has half-masted his flag out of respect, as his arrival just at this time has forced him to be in sight of the mourners."

"Yes, sah, that is it I reckons."

But on came the yacht toward the pier, her flag at half-mast telling a far different story from what Percy and Uncle Toby believed and hoped.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RETURN.

"TOBY, I do not see my father upon the yacht," suddenly cried Percy Wyndham, making a spy-glass of his two hands, and turning them upon the little craft, as it drew nearer to the pier.

"No, sah, nor does I; but my eyes is growin' a leetle dim o' late, Mars' Percy."

"I recognize Dot, and Philip, but cannot see who it is at the tiller, though it is not my father."

"I hope that half-mast flag does not mean more sorrow and trouble for us, Uncle Toby."

"I hopes not, sah, from my soul I do, Mars' Percy, for we have been sadly 'flicted of late, sah."

"Indeed we have, Toby—oh! I see the helmsman now, and it is *not* my father."

"No, sah, for he has a long beard, as I can see now."

"Yes; but where is my father?" and the young man became very pale.

Glancing over toward The Everglades, he saw that the Jack-o'-lantern had come to anchor in front of the mansion, and carriages and horsemen going along the highways showed that those who had attended the funeral were dispersing.

Again looking at the yacht, as she went round to approach the pier, he saw a man at her helm whom he had never seen before.

The little craft was skillfully brought alongside of the pier, and the helmsman leaped ashore.

It was Frank Forrester, and his courtly bow and distinguished appearance at once told Percy Wyndham that he stood in the presence of a gentleman.

"I need not ask, sir, if this is Mr. Percy Wyndham, as your resemblance to your father is unmistakable?" said Mr. Forrester, with his fascinating smile.

"I am Percy Wyndham, sir, and most anxious to learn if you can tell me aught regarding my father, for I see you have landed from his yacht."

"Alas! I would that I could give you good tidings, my dear Mr. Wyndham; but I cannot, as my tidings are of the saddest nature."

The lips of the young man quivered, and he became very white; but in a voice that was firm, he answered:

"Has aught befallen my father?"

"Yes, he was forced into a duel and—"

"Wounded?"

"No, sir."

"Killed?"

"I regret to say that he was."

"And where is his body?"

"In the cabin of his yacht, for I brought it home that I might break the sad news to yourself and your mother as gently as possible, for it was the wish of your father."

"I thank you, sir."

"You were then my father's second?"

"Yes, sir; though my position was a painful one, I being the only second."

"And you were the friend of his adversary as well?"

"His adversary was my friend, and your father I hardly knew; but under the circumstances I acted for both."

"This was a remarkable proceeding, sir, I must say, and wholly at variance with the laws of dueling."

Percy Wyndham spoke with some asperity, and with just the shadow of a suspicion of wrong, and observing it, Mr. Forrester answered with a smile:

"It was no more strange, Mr. Wyndham, than your duel with Major Mortimer, in which there were *no seconds*."

Percy winced at this, and said frankly:

"Pardon me, if in the suddenness of the shock, and grief for the loss of my father, I appear rude."

"I understand your feelings fully, Mr. Wyndham, and will explain all as it occurred, when you are at leisure to hear it."

"Thank you," and springing down upon the yacht's deck, the young man entered the little cabin and was alone with his dead father.

For some moments he remained there, while Mr. Forrester stood for awhile trying to draw the almost broken-hearted Toby into conversation, and failing in this, turned and glanced over toward where the Jack-o'-lantern lay at anchor.

"Toby, come here," suddenly called out the youth from the cabin, and the old negro approached and gazed upon the face of the dead, while he said sadly:

"Poor master! Poor master, he has gone from us forever."

Then Dot and Philip were called, and taking the body of their master in their arms, at the order of Percy, they moved toward the mansion.

"Come, sir—"

"My name is Forrester, sir. Frank Forrester," suggested that gentleman with his genial smile.

Percy bowed, and continued:

"Come, Mr. Forrester, I shall have to claim you as my guest, as long as you will honor me with your company."

"Thank you, Mr. Wyndham, I will remain if I can be of service to you in your affliction,

and until I have told you the facts of the duel; but my yacht lies yonder in The Everglades harbor, and I have promised to be the guest of Mr. Mortimer."

"Ah! you are then the friend of Mr. Mark Mortimer."

"Then of course I would not detain you from his company?" said Percy with something of a sneer.

"Yes, sir," answered Forrester, the smile on his lips hiding the bitterness of the words he was about to utter:

"It was my friend Mark Mortimer whom I seconded in the duel with your father."

Percy Wyndham started as though stung by a serpent, and turned his blazing eyes upon the speaker, while he said in a hoarse whisper:

"Mr. Forrester, did my father fall by the hand of Mark Mortimer?"

"He did, sir."

"In a duel?"

"Yes."

"When fought?"

"At midnight of last night."

"Where?"

"On the waters of the Sound, your father standing on his yacht, Mr. Mortimer upon mine, the vessels lying to for the purpose, the distance being about ten paces, and pistols, your father's they were, being the weapons used."

"I hope I have been explicit enough, Mr. Wyndham?"

"No, sir, for I would know the cause of the quarrel that led to a duel?"

"Your having killed Major Mortimer in a duel."

Percy Wyndham fairly groaned, but answered:

"Then Mr. Mortimer should have held me not my father responsible."

"Of what Mr. Mortimer should or should not do, I am not the judge, Mr. Wyndham, and as it seems I can give you no further information, or be of service to you, permit me to bid you adieu."

"For the good offices rendered my father, Mr. Forrester, I wish you would remain my guest as long as you please to stay."

"Thank you, I must take my leave, and yet, should you desire other information of me upon the subject, I will be only too happy to respond," and raising his hat, as they reached the beach, Mr. Forrester sauntered on that way to the plantation of the Mortimers, his manner and face not in the slightest degree ruffled by what he had passed through.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE THIRD STROKE:

In his own room the form of the late master of Lakelands was laid, and to the grand old home came many with real sympathy, and many more with simple curiosity.

The news having spread that Mark Mortimer, to avenge his father's death, had demanded satisfaction from the father of his slayer, the affair excited the deepest interest upon all sides, and people wondered who would be the next victim, for would not Percy Wyndham seek revenge?

It certainly looked so, and the whole neighborhood was on the *qui vive* for the next tragedy.

To those calling at Lakelands Toby said that his mistress was ill, and consequently could see no one, and that his master had given strict orders that he would see no one.

This was a disappointment to many, but if the young heir to Lakelands wished to nurse his grief alone he certainly could not be blamed for following the bent of his humor.

All, however, who cared to attend, were invited to the funeral of Captain Wyndham, to be held the following afternoon, and this the crowd were forced to be content with, for old Toby was a formidable barrier to pass, when he was backed by his master's orders.

"The last one of 'em has gone, master," he said, with ready tact dropping the Mars' Percy, now that he was the head of the household.

"I am glad of it, Toby."

"So am I, sah; but they hung on like wool to a nigger's head, and seemed determined to get in."

"Well, after to-morrow I hope we will be left alone to our grief, Toby."

"Now go and ask Phoebe to come here."

Toby obeyed, and the mulatress soon appeared before her young master, as he sat in the library alone.

"Phoebe, you have safely guarded my mother's room?"

"Yes, sah."

"And she has heard, nor seen anything to cause her to suspect more trouble?"

"No, sah, she sits in her rocking-chair and pretends to embroider, but she does not really work, sah."

"Then I will go now and break the news to her, and bitter indeed the blow will be."

Like one who had a duty to perform he shrunk from with direst dread, he went to the wing devoted to his mother's use, and crossing the inner room knocked gently at the door leading into the outer apartment.

The room where he stood was large, and furnished with every luxury, for there were books in abundance, paintings rare and costly, a guitar inlaid with gold and precious stones, and divans and easy-chairs innumerable.

In answer to his knock there came in a constrained voice:

"Come in!"

He unlocked the door from his side, upon receiving the permission to enter, and found himself in a sleeping-chamber.

A luxurious bed, a lounge, toilet stand, and other furniture of use and comfort were in the room, while in a large rocking chair, her feet upon an embroidered stool was the mistress of Lakelands.

In her hands was a bit of fancy embroidery, and by her side on a stand was a vase of the rarest flowers, which filled the room with perfume.

But the woman who sat in the rocking-chair, moving to and fro with a monotonous motion seemed not the beautiful being who had only a few days before, so fearlessly faced Major Mark Mortimer, and sent him to his doom, for her face had become white and haggard, and the full lips more now an expression of pain.

Since his return from the court-room, Percy Wyndham had not seen his mother, for he wished to avoid questioning until his father should arrive, and Phoebe had told him he was away from home.

Now, at sight of the change in her, he was inexpressibly shocked, for most dearly had he loved his beautiful mother.

To him she had been mother, sister, sweetheart and friend, and when he boldly took upon himself the killing of Major Mortimer, it was to shield her he so dearly loved from the tongue of public slander.

For himself, a man, to kill Major Mortimer in a duel, was not out of the way in the morals of that age; but for a woman, and the beautiful and wealthy Mexican wife of Captain Percy Wyndham to do so, was quite another question, so he had taken to himself all blame, and once having crossed the rubicon of deception, like others so committed, he was forced to keep it up, even though he saw it made his mother believe she was almost mad.

Dressed in a canary gown of some soft texture, and with her raven hair falling in waves over her shoulders, and upon the floor, for she would not allow Phoebe to touch it now, Nina Wyndham still looked grandly beautiful, yet a closer glance showed clearly the lines of suffering that were growing into her face.

Seeing who it was that entered, when she had expected Phoebe or her mother, Mrs. Wyndham's face flushed with pleasure, and she arose quickly, crying:

"Oh, Percy, I am so glad you have come, for I have been oh! so lonesome and so ill."

"See, they feared I would harm myself in the delirium upon me, and they have barred the windows outside to prevent my escape, and when Nance and Phoebe come in they lock the door after them, and put the key in their pockets, and when they go out, the door is also locked upon me."

"Oh, Percy, my son! my son! what does all this mean?"

She placed her hands upon his broad shoulders and looked up so appealingly into his face that it cut him to the heart.

"Mother, it means sorrow, trouble, gloom, for both of us," he said, in a low, tender voice.

"Your father?"

The words came in a question, and spoken in a voice that was hardly audible, while she trembled as with some great fright.

"Alas! mother, it is of my father that I have come to see you."

She looked at him wildly, and then with vehemence broke forth, speaking with wonderful rapidity and in Spanish, her native tongue:

"My son, I have suffered for years."

"Long ago I had my joyous heart wrecked by a man's inhumanity, and I have lived with phantoms ever since."

"Your father I learned to love, and then to idolize, and, for his sake, ay, and for your sake, Percy, I sought revenge upon the man who had wronged me."

"It seems like a terrible dream to me now, that scene at the Magnolia Arbor; but tell me was it true, or has my mind fled from me?"

"Tell me if I killed Mark Mortimer, or did he in reality fall by your hand?"

"I can bear anything now, for I am strong."

"Yes, I am so strong that I met him myself to avenge the past rather than allow your father to do so, for I feared he would be killed and that God would spare me."

"If I fell I knew it would be but a rest from my sorrows."

"Speak! did I not kill Major Mark Mortimer at the Magnolia Arbor?"

He had carried out the deception until a time when he could see his father, and then tell her why he had taken upon himself the blame.

That father's ears were deaf now for all eternity, and yet, when telling his mother of the death of her husband, he could not make known to her that he was playing a part against her, even though for her good, and he determined to keep up the deception yet awhile, so he answered firmly:

"My poor mother, you have had some horrible nightmare, and wishing Major Mortimer dead from some wrong he has done you in the past, and seeing him fall by my hand, you became possessed with the belief that you had killed him."

She passed her hands in a dazed way across her forehead, as though striving to recall the truth, and her son pitied her deeply.

Then she said, softly:

"So Uncle Toby and Nance and Phoebe told me, and they were there."

"Well, he fell by your hand, my son, and you have avenged your mother and yourself, as it was fitting that you should do."

"But, Percy, your father went to New Orleans to kill Mark Mortimer, and ere this he should have returned."

"He has returned, mother!"

"Percy has returned, and comes not to me, my son?"

"Alas! mother, he cannot," groaned the grieving youth.

Again she seized him by each shoulder, and asked in husky tones:

"Boy, what do you mean?"

"Mother! my father was drawn into a duel with young Mark Mortimer, and was killed."

She drew herself up, swayed to and fro, and then burst forth in a fit of the wildest laughter, while she cried:

"Ha! ha! ha! the red work has begun, and accursed be all of the name of Wyndham who takes his hand off the throat of one whose veins are filled with the hated blood of a Mortimer."

"Ha! ha! ha! smite, slay, show no mercy, Percy Wyndham, for I, your mother, command you to obey."

"Mother! mother! for the love of God be calm," he cried, in dread and sorrow.

But the brain was on fire, the blood surging through the stricken heart, and he called to Nance and Phoebe to aid him in calming her wild paroxysms.

But alas! the third stroke had fallen, and Nina Wyndham was a raving maniac.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT REST.

A HUSH had fallen upon the home of Lakelands, which told that the shadow of death rested upon its roof, and those who came to attend the last obsequies to its dead master spoke in whispers, and moved about with sober mien, for from the distant wing, where the mistress of the mansion was, came ever and anon loud wailing, to be followed by shrieks of laughter that seemed almost demoniacal.

It told of the madness of the lovely woman whose mind had been wrecked by her husband's untimely end, and whose heart held a secret the world could not gaze upon.

White as marble, and as stern as bronze, Percy Wyndham came into the spacious hall, where lay the remains of his father, and stood at the head of the coffin.

The low words of the clergyman, the wailing of the sorrowing negroes, even the shrieks and bursts of laughter of his mother, seemed not to impress him.

At last the procession, led by the dead and the mourning son, moved toward the burying-ground of Lakelands.

It was back from the shore, upon a green hillside, from whence a view of The Everglades and the waters beyond could be distinctly seen, as could also the clump of willows which sheltered the last earthly home of the Mortimers.

It was a lovely spot, almost adjoining the park of The Everglades, and had been a favorite resting-place, from the noonday heat, of the son who now went there to place his father beneath its green sod.

Around the grave assembled the mourners, and into it was lowered all that was mortal of Captain Wyndham.

Then the heavy earth fell upon the coffin, the grave was rounded into that shape which all the living know so well marks the last abode of the dead, and the crowd turned away.

In groups they left, and after awhile even Uncle Toby had gone, leaving Percy Wyndham standing like a statue, gazing down upon the grave.

For some moments he stood thus, and then dropping upon his knees raised one hand toward Heaven, while the other rested upon the grave, and his lips moved, as though he were uttering a prayer or an oath.

Then he arose and turned from the spot to find that he was not alone.

"Pardon me, Mr. Wyndham, but seeing that you remained, I returned to offer you my deepest sympathy."

"It was Frank Forrester, and he extended his hand to the youth, who said, without taking his offered grasp:

"Mr. Forrester, if I wrong you may God forgive me, but I neither will touch the hand, or accept the sympathy of a man whom I doubt."

The words came coldly and distinctly from the white lips, and the burning eyes looked straight into the face of the man he addressed.

Not the slightest change came over the face of the man who stood before him, while he answered:

"I am sorry, sir, to have aroused your suspicions; but let time show that you were wrong."

"Good day, Mr. Wyndham."

He raised his hat politely, and turning upon his heel strode away.

For a long time did Percy Wyndham remain standing in silence where he had been left by the yachtsman, and then he started to return to the mansion, for it was approaching sunset, and he was anxious about his mother.

A few steps he took along the path, then baled and went off in another direction.

A walk of a few hundred yards brought him to the clear, deep waters of a lagoon or bayou.

Here was a small row and sail-boat combined, tied to a tree, and remembering that he had left it there some days before, he had determined to return that way home, for the lagoon flowed into the waters of the Sound half a mile below, and from its mouth to the Lakelands pier it was but a pull of a mile.

Springing into the little boat and seizing the oars, he started on his way, little dreaming how strangely Fate was leading him by the hand.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FATE.

THE lagoon upon the deep bosom of which Percy Wyndham was floating in his little boat wound within a third of a mile of the mansion of The Everglades, and almost bordered the burying-ground of that estate, emptying into the blue waters of the sound only a few hundred yards from where rested the Mortimer dead.

Once out of the stream, Percy Wyndham knew he would have to pull along the shore of The Everglades plantation and in full view of the house; but this he did not care for, for as the Mortimers were then uppermost in his mind, it made little matter that they should also be in his sight, if he did see them as he went by.

Major Mortimer and his son he had often seen, and once he had caught sight of Mabel, reclining in her hammock, and it was the very day in which he had rowed round to the graveyard.

But this was all he had known of them, other than that there was a feud between the Wyndhams and the Mortimers, the cause of which the old negroes had hinted at.

As he rowed along he suddenly came in view of the graveyard of the Mortimers, and ceasing rowing, he allowed his boat to float with the current.

As it was about to round a bend he beheld a boat pulled by two men, and with a third standing in the stern, glide slowly in toward the shore of The Everglades.

Instantly he discovered that the men were strangers in those parts, and that their object seemed to be secret, as the man in the stern motioned to the rowers instead of spoke to them, when he wished them to stop rowing.

One dip of his oar sent his own boat under the overhanging branches of a willow, cut of sight of the others, and clutching the drooping foliage he held it motionless.

Then peering out of the foliage he saw the boat touch the shore lightly, and the man in the stern went forward and stepped out upon the bank.

The other two joined him there, and he pointed up toward the burying-ground.

While one got back into the boat, then took the oars, and turned the stern toward the land, the other two skulked, rather than walked away from the shore.

All this did Percy see with surprise, and more he observed, and that was that one man carried a rope, the other a cloak.

"It looks as though some deviltry was on hand, and I see what it is," muttered the youth, and he coolly drew a pistol from his breast pocket and carefully examined its priming and flint.

Then he arose in his boat and gazed in the direction the two men had taken.

He saw them skulking along from bush to tree, and then appear near the graveyard on the knoll.

The foliage between cut off his view there; but there came to his ears a stifled cry, and a moment after the two men came into full view, hurrying toward the water's edge, and one of them bore in his arms what was evidently a human form, enveloped in a cloak.

A glimpse of white skirts showed him that it was a woman, and who could it be but Mabel Mortimer?

His innate chivalry prompted him to go to the rescue.

But then was she not the daughter of Major Mortimer, the sister of the man who had slain his father?

He hesitated, until suddenly freeing her face, she gave one loud cry for help:

"Help! brother! help!"

With a curse the man smothered her cries and bounded on toward his boat.

But that appeal had touched the heart of Percy Wyndham.

Whatever Major Mortimer might have been, and Mark Mortimer was, she, the daughter and the sister, was innocent.

He had heard from the negroes how noble and kind she was, and how she ever aided the poor fishermen and their families, and he had thus been taught to respect her.

Now she was in dire danger, and in the power of kidnappers.

A short half-hour more and darkness would fall upon the sea, and pursuit of the kidnappers would be impossible.

She had, like a dutiful daughter, been kneeling by the side of her father's grave, praying for the man Percy Wyndham cursed.

But the heart of the brave youth was not warped, and dropping his oars into the water, he sent his little boat out from its shelter like an arrow from a bow.

Just then the two men reached their boat, and he was discovered.

"Hold there, or I fire!" he cried, in ringing tones, as he sent his boat forward with a velocity that would carry it alongside of the other one, and rose to his feet, his pistol in his hand.

"Curse it, we are surprised!

"But he's only one, so kill him," yelled the leader, as he sprung into his boat.

The answer of one of his men was to fire, and the bullet cut its way through the arm of Percy Wyndham.

But he fired, too, and the one who had aimed at his life fell dead in the boat.

Then the youth threw aside his weapon, and seized one of his light oars, and wielding it as a club, brought it down with terrific force upon the head of the oarsman, as the two boats touched.

A groan and the man fell backward, just as the third one of the party, the leader, and he

who held Mabel Mortimer in his arms, laid her in the bow while he turned and fired upon the daring youth.

The bullet was well aimed, for it cut a gash over his temple, causing the blood to flow freely, and the wounded youth to sway, as though about to fall, for the shock half stunned him.

But, recovering himself quickly, with a savage cry he sprung upon his foe and the two clutched in a deadly embrace.

The combat at once overturned the boat, and Percy Wyndham with a cry of horror, saw the bound form of the conscious maiden sink beneath the dark waters, her eyes fixed appealingly upon him.

With the energy of despair he exerted his strength, which had ever been great, in spite of his slender, elegant form, and grasped his adversary by the throat with a gripe that seemed to make the bones crack.

Savagely, as the two went beneath the waters they fought, and the foaming and boiling caldron above them, showed how terrific was the struggle, and that it was a battle of giants.

But Percy Wyndham knew that not only his life, but that of Mabel Wyndham depended upon him now, and he threw every effort forth to crush the throat of his antagonist beneath his iron gripe.

He felt the blows, the gripes of his foe, yet minded them not, and in less than a quarter of a minute, although it seemed ages to him, he knew that he had conquered.

No sooner had the gripe of his foe relaxed, than he dashed him from him, and arose to the surface, pushing him further down into the depths with his feet as he did so.

Once upon the top of the waters, and a breath of air revived him, and eagerly he looked around for the form he had seen go down into the dark depths, bound securely.

It was nowhere visible, and he quickly scrambled upon the shore, and when the ripple made by his body, had died away, gazed down into the deep stream.

At first all seemed darkness, but then his eyes detected far below him, a white object, and head-first he plunged into the waters, and dove down, down, down.

It seemed to him that the white form receded from him as he approached it; and he shouted to it, in his wild energy to stay, although the waters rushed into his throat and nearly strangled him.

But at last he clutched the white dress, drew the slender form toward him, and then rose upward from the bottom.

Then it seemed as though he would never rise, but that he was doomed to go upward, upward forever, with that fair form clasped tightly in his arms.

But at last he reached the surface, and a few vigorous strokes brought him to the bank.

Wounded, worn out, suffering, he staggered up the bank, bearing his precious load and then, tottering, fell utterly prostrated and unconscious.

CHAPTER XXX.

A FIENDISH THREAT.

WHEN Mabel Mortimer had been seized, at the grave of her father, she had uttered a cry that had quickly been stifled.

Then she was securely and swiftly bound, her arms to her side, and enveloped in the large cloak, which one of her kidnappers had carried from the boat.

Who were her enemies she had no means of knowing, for she had never seen them before; but she was a brave girl, and never for an instant lost her presence of mind.

She remembered having seen her brother and Mr. Frank Forrester, reclining in the hammocks, in the shaded grounds nearest the burying-ground, and to the former she had given one cry for help.

Then she beheld the boat and its single occupant coming to her aid.

She had seen Percy Wyndham often, when he little knew what lovely eyes were upon him, as he sailed, or rowed about the waters, and, although she had taken her observations wholly through a spy-glass, she knew his form and face well.

Thus it was she saw who it was that was coming to her aid, although she knew how little cause he had for doing so, or rescuing one of her name.

Somehow she felt that he would save her, and at once she watched all that occurred.

She saw that he was wounded by the shot of

one of her kidnappers, and that it not only did not deter him from pressing on, but that his aim was most deadly even with the arm that had received the wound.

The crashing blow with the clubbed oar she had also witnessed, and then she had been rudely dropped by her kidnapper who found it necessary to defend himself.

Even in that moment of awful horror and suspense, Mabel Mortimer saw that Percy Wyndham regarded not his second wound, although she saw the cruel gash cut by the bullet, and that he strove hard to prevent his antagonist from upsetting the boat.

But this was impossible, and the three went down together, the maiden confident that she was going to her death, for what power could save her now.

Her kidnapper was a large, heavy man, her rescuer slender and youthful, and she believed there was no hope, and gave herself up for lost.

Mabel was an expert swimmer, and a good diver, having remained under water many a time until she alarmed those who saw her, but bound as she was, and hampered by her clothing, she could do nothing, though she did not lose consciousness, and felt herself seized and carried upward from the deep depths where she had sunk.

But was it her rescuer, or her kidnapper?

It was a fearful moment of suspense, and then, just as she felt consciousness must leave her she reached the surface, the air gave her strength, and she saw that it was Percy Wyndham that had saved her.

He fell, with her in his arms, and her long hair twisted about him and across his face.

At first she was powerless to move, but then she glanced up, and a glad cry came to her lips as she saw a well-known form approaching.

It was her brother.

"Good God! Mabel, what has happened?"

He looked pale and anxious, and as her hair and mantilla—for the cloak had fallen off—yet hid the face of Percy Wyndham, he knew not who it was.

"Oh, brother! thank God you have come!" she cried.

"But, in Heaven's name! what has happened, Mabel?"

"Release me from these bonds, brother, and I will tell you, for you must see that I am tied hands and feet."

He quickly bent over and severed the bonds and aided her to her feet, and then he beheld the form and face of her rescuer, and turned deadly pale.

The blood was oozing from the gash in the forehead of Percy Wyndham, and his coat, having been torn in his struggle with the kidnapper, a rent in the sleeve showed that his shirt was saturated with the same crimson current of life.

Like a madman did Mark Mortimer gaze upon his foe, and once more he asked the question, and in deep, husky tones:

"What does this mean, Mabel Mortimer?"

She was angered by his tone and manner, and replied, somewhat coldly:

"It means, Mark, that I was seized at the grave of our father, as I was placing flowers upon it, by two men, who bound me and threw a cloak about me.

"They carried me to their boat, in which was a third person, and I would have been borne off, taken, God only knows where and for what purpose, had not that gentleman, Mr. Percy Wyndham, come to my rescue.

"He was wounded, but killed one of the men with his pistol, knocked another down with his oar, and though a second time shot, as you see, he grappled with my assailant, the boat was nearly upset, and I rolled into the water with them.

"Mr. Wyndham was victor in the death-struggle, and then dove down and brought me up from the bottom, where I lay, and then became unconscious from loss of blood and utter prostration, I think it must be.

"The boat, half full of water, floats there, as you see, with two of the wretches in it, and I am saved through the courage of one at whose hands we had no right to expect it, and it is but right that we should do what we can now for this brave young man, and forget that he is a foe."

"Never!"

He almost shrieked the word, and then added, savagely:

"What was he doing on the water when an hour ago his father was buried?"

"That I know not."

"Strange, for Forrester went to the grave to meet him there, and the boy turns up, and my friend is not to be seen," said Mark Mortimer, as though speaking aloud his thoughts.

"You seem more interested in trying to account for the presence here of Mr. Wyndham, Mark, than you do in endeavoring to restore him, or in the safety of your sister."

"I am horrified at this occurrence, Mabel, and for all on earth, if I possessed it, I would not have you saved by this man."

"Ah! you would rather have had me stolen, or even die?"

"Frankly, yes, for I expected to face this man in the *duello* some day, but after this I would not dare call him out, or accept a challenge from him."

"God grant no more blood be shed, Mark."

"Percy Wyndham killed our father in a duel, and it is said from just cause, and then wounded poor Duke who sought to avenge him."

"Now you have slain *his* father, and for the love of Heaven let this vendetta end there."

"By Heaven, but it shall end!"

"What mean you, Mark?" she asked, frightened by his strange manner and look.

"That man shall never return to consciousness," was the diabolical threat.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A GIRL AT BAY.

"MARK MORTIMER, I am ashamed of you."

Mabel spoke with the utmost scorn in her tone and look.

"And I am ashamed of you, Mabel Mortimer, for allowing your life to be saved by that accursed being whose hand is red with the blood of our father."

"Ay, and who saved the life of one whose brother's hand is stained with the blood of his father?"

Mark Mortimer winced under this shot, and then looked upon his sister with intense surprise.

Her nature had been ever so dovelike, he was amazed now to see the talons beneath the feathers.

But he seemed determined to carry out his fiendish purpose, and stooped over to raise the prostrate and unconscious form in his arms.

As he did so, a pistol fell from his breast pocket upon the ground, and with a quick movement Mabel stooped and seized it.

"Oh, don't fear, sis," he sneered, "I do not intend to shoot him."

"What is your intention then?" she asked, firmly.

"Well, you see, three men went to kidnap you, when Percy Wyndham, forgetting the vendetta between our families, nobly went to your rescue, shot one of the kidnappers, smashed in the skull of another, and saved you from the third by jumping overboard with him, but lost his life in so doing."

"But he is not dead, yet I fear he will die, if you do not stanch that bleeding from his wounds, brother."

"Oh, yes," he continued, with a fiendish sneer, "he is dead, for he died in trying to save you, just as I, alarmed by the firing came upon the scene."

"See, I will prove my words," and he raised the form of Percy Wyndham in his strong arms, for Mark Mortimer was an athlete.

"What would you do, brother?" asked Mabel, hoarsely.

"Just end his career by letting him drop into the lagoon."

"You would drown him?"

"No; he will drown himself, you know, sister mine, and of course I am not to blame for that."

"Good mother! is this my brother, Mark Mortimer, who speaks these words?" cried the girl in a terror.

"It certainly is, sis."

"Preservation of self is nature's first law, and I intend to end this vendetta right here, and live in peace."

"Now let me pass, for this fellow outweighs his looks fifty pounds."

The young girl hesitated, but only for an instant, and then her face became livid, and drawing herself up to her full height, she said, in a voice painfully distinct and threatening:

"Mark Mortimer, that man took my father's life, and you balanced the debt by killing his father; but he saved mine, at the risk of his own and against fearful odds, and I swear to you, brother though you be of mine, before

you shall cowardly murder him I will send this bullet through your heart."

His own pistol was leveled at him, and the hand that held it, girl's though it was, was firm as adamant.

Mark Mortimer was dumb with amazement and fury; but he knew that his sister would keep her word, for her manner, her looks proved it, and he dared not attempt to carry out his fell intention.

She was at bay, daring her brother, and he was cowed and forced to yield, and he tried to do so by extricating himself by falsehood from the position most unenviable in which he found that he was placed.

"Mabel, I had no idea of carrying out my threat, and am sorry that my sister thought me so base."

"I wished to frighten you, and see what effect this man's saving your life had made upon you."

"I regret to believe that it has offset his crime of taking our father's life—"

"Your crime offset that, brother," she said, attacking him with his own act and words as arrows.

He quivered with passion, but went on:

"It was my intention to take him to his boat, which I see has lodged against the shore, and row him to his home."

"Now I will do so, but I very much believe he will die, as he seems to have a wound upon his body, which accounts for his long unconsciousness."

"I will accompany you there."

"No; that I certainly will not permit you to do."

"Then I will not permit you to go alone."

"Ha! you doubt me?"

"Permit me to offer my services."

It was Frank Forrester who spoke, and he came forward and joined them from out the shadow of the willows.

In his so suddenly and unexpectedly joining them Mabel Mortimer saw only help in time of need, while Mark Mortimer felt that he had overheard and seen all that had passed.

"Oh, Mr. Forrester, please aid us in our need, for this young gentleman was sorely wounded in saving my life, and though it is our foe, Mr. Percy Wyndham, he yet must not be neglected now."

"I agree with you, Miss Mortimer, and as I see a boat yonder, will row him to his home as the quickest way to aid him."

"But let me see if he is seriously hurt, for I am something of a surgeon."

Mabel turned away and walked to where the boat had caught against a branch that overhung the water, and drew it to the nearest point to where Percy Wyndham lay.

"Well, Mr. Forrester, what is the result?" she asked, as she saw that gentleman rise from the side of the wounded youth.

"The wound in the arm, and this one on the head are not serious, though they have bled freely; but I think it is loss of blood and pure exhaustion that keep him insensible."

"Then there is no wound on his body?"

"None."

"Mark, you hear what Mr. Forrester says."

"But come, I need your assistance to take me home, and Mr. Forrester, I know you will do all you can for poor Mr. Wyndham," and taking the arm of her brother she led him away.

"Well, 'poor Mr. Wyndham' is good, of a man who killed her father, and feud though there be between the names of Wyndham and Mortimer this afternoon's work will bury the past between two of them, or I am no reader of human nature."

"By Jove it would have been better had the boy been killed, even had Mark had to carry out his purpose— Ah! I am glad to see you have recovered consciousness," and Mr. Forrester turned to Percy, who just then arose to his feet, though with an effort.

"Thank you, yes, I have recovered sufficiently to go home alone, so I will not trouble you," was the laconic reply, and in a tone that was meant to convey the information that he had not been unconscious so long as was supposed.

"As you please, sir, but permit me to bandage your wounds, and prevent the flow of blood."

"Thank you," and Percy held forth his handkerchief, and the yachtsman quickly bound up the wounds, and again offered his services.

But they were firmly refused, though polite-

ly, and springing into his boat and seizing an oar, Percy Wyndham sculled rapidly back to the spot which he had left, as the quicker way of reaching home.

Frank Forrester watched his departure, until the twilight shadows shut him out from his view and then turned and walked toward The Everglades, muttering:

"There is some strange mystery in this kidnapping scheme of Mabel Mortimer, which I must investigate."

"Yes, there must be no secrets I cannot fathom."

CHAPTER XXXII.

HOPELESS.

UNCLE TOBY, who was seated in the hallway of Lakelands, was positively startled out of his usual dignity into terror and amazement, when he beheld his master suddenly enter the mansion, wet, bleeding, haggard, and very shaky upon his feet.

"Fore the Lord, master, what is the matter?" he cried in a voice that trembled.

"Help me to my room, Uncle Toby, and send Caleb after Doctor Raleigh with all haste," was the answer.

The old negro did as directed, leaving his master as soon as he sunk into a chair in his own room, and sending Nance to him, while he went to the "quarter" to dispatch Caleb after the doctor.

When he returned he found old Aunt Nance laying out clean clothes for her master, and fixing the bed for him, and hastily he aided the youth into it, for he was very weak and greatly needed rest.

In an hour's time the doctor arrived, and then the wounds were skillfully dressed, and the patient given a soothing draught to aid him to sleep.

"First, doctor, let me ask you to see my poor mother, who, as you may have heard at the trial the other day, has taken a strange fancy that she killed Major Mark Mortimer," said Percy.

"So I heard, and that since your father's death she has utterly lost her mind," answered the physician.

"That is what I wish you to determine, if you please."

"Lead her to believe that I am away from home, if she asks for me, and then discover if her mind is in reality crazed."

The doctor was led to the rooms of Mrs. Wyndham, and remained there for a long while ere he returned to Percy.

"Well?" quickly said the youth as he entered.

"Mr. Wyndham, the shock has certainly unseated your mother's reason, for she asserts that she, not you, killed the major, and threatens to herself avenge the death of your father by killing young Mortimer in a duel."

"Ah me! this is very, very sad; but, doctor, I hope you will undertake the care of my poor mother, but allow nothing of her ravings to become idle gossip."

"You can trust me, Mr. Wyndham."

"But may I ask how you received your two wounds, which were meant to be fatal?"

"Dr. Raleigh, upon that subject my lips are sealed, unless it comes from the other side."

"If they speak, then there will be no secret about it; but if they remain silent, I shall do likewise."

The physician made no reply further upon the subject, but bade Percy to keep quiet, and in a few days he would come round all right.

"One more question, doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Will my mother recover her reason?"

"You wish a frank reply?"

"I do."

"Then my opinion is that her case is utterly hopeless, and you must keep the closest watch upon her."

"Thank you," and Percy closed his eyes, as the physician left the room; but from his lips came again and again one word:

"Hopeless!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ONLY GRATITUDE.

It was some weeks before Percy Wyndham really felt himself once more, for the wounds had caused him to lose considerable blood, and his fierce struggle beneath the water, and then diving after Mabel in his exhausted condition, had utterly prostrated him.

The day after the rescue of Mabel at his hands, it became noised abroad that he had

saved her, and a number of the well-meaning planters had dropped over to Lakelands to express their congratulations, and hope that his bold and noble act would bury the hatchet between the two families, and forever end the vendetta.

But Percy saw no one, and only received the messages left, though Uncle Toby, who, negro like, embellished them in a style that he thought would best please his master.

As there had been no witnesses of the affair, Mark Mortimer came in for some credit, as 'twas said he need not have made known the gallantry of his enemy had he not cared to do so, and 'twas also said that the master of The Everglades had carried Percy to his home.

Upon the whole affair however Mark Mortimer was rather reticent, telling the story as shortly as possible, and seeming not to wish to dwell upon it, and neglecting to speak of how Percy Wyndham got home by his own exertions unaided.

But Mabel told the story to all who asked about it, and hid only the part her brother had played to his detriment in her eyes.

The boat of the kidnappers had been picked up, from where it had drifted, and it was found half full of water, with two dead men in it, one with a bullet in his brain, the other with a broken head, where the clubbed oar had fallen.

But the third kidnapper, the leader had not been found, nor had his body, although search had been made for it in the hope that he might be recognized, or have something about him that might lead to a discovery of why they had tried to kidnap the young mistress of The Everglades.

The other two were rough-looking seamen, evidently by their dress, but no one seemed to recognize them, and they had nothing about them by which they could be recognized, while their boat was a simple fishing skiff.

Some of the negroes had seen a suspicious looking lugger anchor opposite to the forest above The Everglades, and send a boat ashore, as though for spars; but a search revealed no fresh cutting of timber, only a place where a boat had touched, and then shoved off again, and the tracks in the sand fitted the shoes of the two kidnappers who had been killed by Percy Wyndham, so it was set down, that, owing to its being known that Major Mortimer had been a very rich man, and his daughter was his idol, that the maiden was to be kidnapped and held for a large ransom.

As soon as the excitement had died out a little, for the death of the two planters, the wounding of the mulatto, Duke, and attempted kidnapping of Mabel, had kept the neighborhood at a fever heat, the young and lovely mistress of The Everglades called her quadroon maid to her one afternoon, and said:

"Fidele, can I trust you?"

The Creole was one of those dark-skinned daughters of the South who have become noted for their beauty the world over, and whose veins held enough of white blood to destroy the coarse features of the negro.

She was French, and spoke English with a slight accent.

"Oh, Missy Mabelle, don't my dear missy know she can trust Fidele?" she said in a slightly injured tone.

"Yes, Fidele, you are faithful, as your name indicates; but this time I wish to trust you with a great secret."

"Yes, missy."

"You know the gratitude I feel for the young gentleman who saved my life?"

"Yes, missy, Fidele know."

"Well, only from the neighbors have we learned that he has recovered, and it is my wish to show him that I am not thankless for his kindness."

"Yes, missy, but master be awful mad 'bout it."

"If he knew it, yes; but I do not intend that he shall."

"Yes, missy, it better so."

"And therefore, Fidele, I ask your aid."

"I do all I can for my missy."

"Do you see this note?" and Mabel held up a scented note.

"Yes, missy, is it a love letter, for it smell awfully sweet?" innocently said the quadroon.

The face of Mabel Mortimer flushed crimson, and then turned deadly pale, at her words, and the quick eyes of the girl observing it, said hastily:

"Oh missy, I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"Forgive poor Fidele."

"This is not a love letter, Fidele; for it is written to the one who killed my father, as you know; but it is a line of gratitude to him, to prove I have not forgotten that he saved me from a fearful fate."

"You want me to deliver it, missy, over at Lakelands?"

"Yes."

"Fidele will go now."

"No, you must wait until dark, and then take my light skiff and row down to the Lakelands' pier, when you must go up to the mansion, and deliver it to the hands of Mr. Wyndham only."

"Yes, missy."

The girl took the note and concealed it in her bosom, and turned toward the door, when she suddenly glanced from the window, and cried:

"See, missy! there comes the yacht!"

"Which yacht, Fidele?"

"The Jacky-lantern."

Mabel started, and leaving her easy chair, stepped to the window of her little sitting-room, which commanded a fine view of the ground.

A mile distant, standing shoreward under easy tacks, for the wind was off the land, was the Jack-o'-lantern, Frank Forrester's yacht.

A frown covered the beautiful face and she bit her lips, as though with vexation, while Fidele said:

"Too bad he come back so soon, for I know missy don't like him."

"Sh—! you must not speak so, Fidele, of your master's friends."

"Forgive me, missy; but I think he want to marry missy, and—"

"Fidele, you must say no more to me on this subject, for I am but a child in years, and the idea of marrying never entered my head."

"Mr. Forrester is my brother's friend, and when he left a week ago he said he would return here after a short cruise."

"I do not like him, and I do not dislike him, and there it ends."

"Yes, missy."

"I will go, now," and Fidele was glad to escape, for it was the first scolding she had ever received.

After watching the yacht until it dropped anchor close in-shore, and she saw Frank Forrester spring into a boat and row to the pier of The Everglades, Mabel turned away with a sigh, and said:

"How strange it is that my gratitude to Percy Wyndham makes me respect him, in spite of the bitter, fearful past, far more than I do Frank Forrester."

"That man I cannot understand, and yet my brother has hinted that he would like me to become his wife."

"Wife! why I am but a child, and know not even the love by name, at least such love as I would feel for one I expected to marry."

"But I do feel the greatest gratitude to Percy Wyndham, and now he shall know that I have not forgotten and am not wholly ungrateful."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FIDELE'S MISSION.

FROM the piazza of Lakelands, as he paced to and fro, Percy Wyndham beheld the Jack-o'-lantern coming into the harbor of The Everglades, and leveled his glass upon her.

"She has the same crew of four men, and Forrester is at the helm."

"Well, I cannot get it out of my mind that some mystery clings to that man as well as to his vessel, which was for some time a most daring smuggling craft, before he bought her."

"Some men called her a pirate."

"Anyhow, I have half a mind to track her to see and find out just where Mr. Frank Forrester cruises, and what pastime he enjoys."

"Uncle Toby says that the rumor is that Mark Mortimer wishes him to marry his sister, but I do not, cannot, will not believe that she will so sacrifice herself."

As the twilight crept over the land and water, Percy Wyndham left the mansion, crossed the broad lawn in front, and went down toward the pier.

Out to the end of this he walked, and seated in the pavilion, became lost in deep meditation, unmindful of the shadows gathering around him.

Suddenly he started, for there came to his ears a sound he had not heard for many long days.

Rising to his feet he listened a moment, and then, sinking again upon the settee, buried his face in his bands and groaned aloud.

The sound he heard was his mother's voice raised in song.

It came floating down to him, borne on the land breeze, and called up the past.

Clear and sweet as a bird's the notes were, for she had a full, rich voice, and it was an old plaintive ballad that she sung, of one pining behind prison bars.

It touched the young man deeply, for the two strong loves of his life had been for his mother and father.

Now the one lay in his grave back on the hillside, and the other was a maniac who constantly was calling out to old Toby:

"Give the word to fire, Uncle Toby, that I may kill him."

With his face buried in his hands, Percy Wyndham remained as motionless as though the breath had left his body.

But suddenly he again started, and not from the sounds of song, for they had died away.

This time it was a sound out upon the waters that met his ear.

There came the low fall of oars, and soon he discovered that the sound grew louder and louder, and that the boat was coming toward the pier where he was.

His keen eyes soon detected a dark object upon the waters, and he discovered a small boat containing a single occupant.

That the pier was its destination was soon evident, for it came directly to the water stairs and the occupant stepped out.

"By Heaven! it is a woman," he said, and he waited to see what would be her next move.

Fastening the boat, she ascended the water stairs and looked toward the mansion, while she said aloud:

"Whew! it's a long, dark walk, and I'd be scared if I wasn't going for missy."

"What would you be afraid of, my girl?" came the quiet question.

"Mon Dieu! ah! don't hurt me," cried the girl in terror.

"I have no such intention; but tell me who you are, and why you have come here?"

He advanced toward her as he spoke, and she held her ground, while she asked:

"Are you the master of Lakelands?"

"Yes."

"Master Percy Wyndham?"

"I am."

She appeared satisfied with a closer scrutiny, and said:

"I came to seek you, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Fidele."

"Who are you?"

"Only a quadroon slave, sir."

"Where do you come from?"

"The Everglades."

He started at this, in spite of his nerve, and she saw it.

"Who sent you?" he asked after a pause.

"Miesy."

"Your mistress?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mean Miss Mortimer?"

"Yes, sir, Missy Mabelle," answered Fidele, who always gave the name of Mabel a French pronunciation.

"You mean that Miss Mortimer sent you to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"With this letter."

She handed the letter to him and then said quickly:

"Now I must go."

"Good-night, sir."

"Is there any answer, for I cannot read it here?"

"No, sir."

"Good-night."

She re-entered her boat and moved away, while he stood watching her departure.

He saw her pull off from the pier for some distance, and then stop rowing.

Again she dropped her oars into the water, but she had changed her course, as though to row in-shore further.

But once more she stopped rowing, and then, with great haste pulled straight out to sea.

Her movements were so peculiar he looked for the cause.

Listening attentively he heard only the

sound of her oars; but his vision was keen, and ere long he discovered another boat.

"That boat has muffled oars and is in pursuit of the girl," he said quickly.

Springing down the water stairs he quickly unfastened his own rowboat, seized the oars, and sent it flying over the dark waters.

The girl was by this time nearly an eighth of a mile distant, and in her wake only a few fathoms, was her pursuer.

Fidele was a good oarswoman and also possessed strength and endurance, and made her light skiff dart over the waters.

But her pursuer also handled his oars with skill and strength, and slowly gained upon her.

To avoid him she had stood out to sea, and was rapidly leaving the land; but so far out upon the dark waters, and with a pursuer so near, she began to lose nerve, until she suddenly detected a boat in the wake of the one that was coming after her.

It was yet some distance off, but even in the darkness she could see that it was gaining rapidly, and she determined to give a low cry for help, to discover if it was a friend or foe, for she almost hoped against hope that it was the master of Lakelands, who had discovered her danger.

"Help! sir, help!" she cried, in a voice not meant to reach the shore, or the Jack-o'-lantern, at anchor, half a mile away, but the ears of the occupant of the second boat.

"Ay, ay, my girl, pull hard, and I'll look after that fellow," came in low tones, but clear, across the waters.

She recognized the voice, and gave a light laugh of joy, and then set to work with renewed energy, for there came in hoarse tones from her pursuer:

"Curse you, gal, I'll settle you, and then be ready for him."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SPY.

ON, with strong and rapid strokes pulled the frightened quadroon, for the threat of the man had alarmed her, that he might reach her before Percy Wyndham came up with him.

But a glance of a moment at the boat of the young planter told her that he was coming on at a tremendous pace, and she felt renewed courage and the hope that she might hold out until he came up.

A row of a few minutes more brought the pursuer of Fidele within a boat's length of her, and Percy Wyndham was yet three times that distance away.

He could fire upon the girl's pursuer, it was true, and kill him; but a shot upon the waters would alarm them at the The Everglades, Lakelands and on board the Jack-o'-lantern, and he had no desire to figure further in any scenes of a tragic nature.

"Say, you better keep off and mind your own affairs, or I'll make it bad for you," gruffly said the man who was in pursuit of Fidele, addressing Percy Wyndham.

"My affair, villain, is to see what you are chasing that girl for."

"She asked my help, and she shall have it," was the stern reply.

The man saw that he had a fearless antagonist to deal with, and made a tremendous effort, which placed him alongside of the quadroon's boat.

With a cry of alarm, she dropped her oars, and then felt the gripe of the villain upon her arm.

But a superhuman effort of Percy Wyndham made his boat fairly jump out of the water, and he was the next instant alongside of the light skiff of the quadroon, and his pistol was thrust into the face of the girl's pursuer, while he said, sternly:

"Surrender! or I'll kill you."

The man held a knife in his hand, and this was evidently his only weapon, and he saw that he was caught and mastered; but he said, gruffly:

"Who are you?"

"That is a question I intend to ask you, and I shall force from you an answer, too."

"Do you surrender?"

"I don't see how can I help it," was the dogged reply.

"You are wise."

"Now, girl, take the painter of his boat and tie his arms behind him, while I keep him quiet."

With ready, nimble fingers, Fidele obeyed, and the man was at once securely tied, while he said:

"If I piped a call once, I guess the lashing would be on your hands, mister."

"Do so, and I'll drop you overboard," came the threat, which at once silenced the ruffian.

"Now, sir, who are you?"

"A man."

"Come, no nonsense; who are you?"

"I am a sailor."

"Ah! from the Jack-o'-lantern?"

The man was silent.

"Speak!"

"I won't."

"Then overboard you go."

"You wouldn't drown me?"

"Certainly, if you do not tell me the truth."

"Yes, I'm from the Lantern."

"Who sent you to watch this girl?"

"Nobody."

"Tell the truth, sir."

"Nobody sent me."

"Why did you give chase to her then?"

"I was out rowing, saw her boat, and chased her just for fun."

"Well, you lose your fun, and she shall enjoy the laugh."

"Now who sent you to follow her?"

"I said nobody."

With a quick motion of his arm Percy Wyndham dragged the man backward until he lay in a position to easily drop into the sea.

"Mercy, messmate," cried the trembling wretch, amazed at the powerful grip of his captor.

"I shall show you not one particle of mercy if you lie to me, and you have not a minute to live unless you answer my questions."

"Did Mr. Forrester send you after this girl?"

"Yes."

"Where was he?"

"Ashore. He came down to the pier, gave a signal for me to come to him, and told me he had just seen a girl leave in a boat and head toward the Lakelands dock."

"What did he tell you to do with her?"

"Take her on board the Lantern and keep her there until he came off."

"A nice plan of deviltry, this, and one which will not succeed, for you go with me, my man."

"Where?"

"That you shall see," and, turning to Fidele, he continued:

"Now you row home, my girl, and be careful how you trust yourself out upon the water at night."

"Oh, thank you, sir; but shall I tell—"

"Go at once," said Percy Wyndham, sternly, and the tone of his voice told her that he did not wish her to compromise herself in any way before the man.

"Thank you, sir," she answered, and, seizing her oars, she rowed away.

"Now, my man, I'll take you in my boat and set yours adrift."

As Percy Wyndham spoke he dragged the man into his boat, and, taking up his oars, started homeward, leaving the skiff floating and drifting upon the waters.

Pulling straight to his dock, he ordered his prisoner ashore, and then marched him before him up to the mansion steps.

A low call brought Toby out on the piazza.

"Well, master, is that you?"

"Yes; get me the keys of the lock-up."*

"I have them, sah," announced Uncle Toby, who was a kind of major-domo on the plantation.

"Here is a prisoner for you, Toby."

"What nigger's been behaving bad, master?"

"It is no negro, Toby, but a white man, one of the crew of the Jack-o'-lantern, whom I caught in deviltry."

"Here, my man, go in there, and if you make any disturbance, I shall buck and gag you."

They had halted before a stout brick house of two rooms, and with grating over the windows, and a heavy iron door.

This was the lock-up, and one night in there was generally sufficient to conquer the most refractory slave.

"Here, messmate, if it's talk you want out of me, I'll tell you all I know, if you'll only let me go," said the man.

"I'll see you to-morrow, my man. Toby, you give him his meals," and locking the door, Percy Wyndham turned away, followed by Uncle Toby, who felt quite proud because he had a white man under lock and key.

"How is my mother to-night, Toby?" asked

* In olden times large plantations had a place to put refractory slaves, which was called a lock-up.

Percy Wyndham, as the two reached the mansion.

"Doleful, sah, for she was singing songs that made me cry, sah."

"I heard her. Good-night," and leaving the old negro to shut up the mansion, as was his wont, Percy Wyndham went to his own room, and throwing himself down in an easy-chair, turned up the lamp and took the letter from his pocket.

It was addressed simply:

"MR. PERCY WYNDHAM,
Lakelands."

The writing was in a bold hand, not to be suspected as written by a young girl, so full of character was it.

The seal had on it the crest of the Mortimers, a helmet and pair of crossed swords.

Breaking the seal he read, written in the same beautiful hand:

"THE EVERGLADES, Friday.

"Will Mr. Percy Wyndham accept from one whose life he saved, at great personal danger and suffering, an acknowledgment that she appreciates fully in her heart all that he has done for her, and regrets that the bitter past alone keeps her from personally proving that she is full of gratitude, and not ungrateful, as her silence during his illness may have led him to suppose!

"With every wish for the shadows of the past to be lifted from Mr. Wyndham's life, may the one he has so well served subscribe herself, notwithstanding the graves between them, not his foe, but his friend,

"MABEL MORTIMER."

This was the letter sent by Mabel Mortimer to Percy Wyndham, and received by him in the honesty with which it was written.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LADY OF THE LAGOON.

LET me now take my reader to a scene a few miles away from the Everglades plantation, and in the densest part of the thick forest, which at that point ran to the very beach of the sound.

Here and there dark watered lagoons penetrated inland, and a perfect network of bayous were formed, most of them capable of floating a vessel, as far as the depth was concerned, but which were overhung by the branches of trees, interlaced with vines, and draped with moss, until a natural archway was formed over almost every stream.

On one part of this forest-coast the land arose to a ridge some forty feet above the level of the surrounding country.

The ridge was narrow and ended in a cliff that jutted into the water a few hundred feet beyond the line of shore upon either side.

Upon this ridge stood a cabin of no mean pretensions, for it contained four rooms, had a piazza in its front, and was most comfortably furnished, though not a solitary article was house furniture, all being taken from the cabins of vessels.

There was a flower-garden in front of the cabin, with scores of gay flowers of all kinds in it, a vegetable garden in the rear, where were also a small stable and chicken yard.

In the former were two horses, a cow wandered in the pasture back of the stable, and a number of chickens were in the inclosure, while quantities of ducks and geese disported in the waters of the lagoon.

In the front, in the waters of the creek, were several skiffs, a cat-rig sail-boat, and a sloop of ten tons.

Altogether the place was a cheerful one, in spite of its gloomy surroundings, and those who dwelt there certainly showed an appreciation of the comforts of life.

One of the occupants was a man of forty-five or fifty, a Spaniard with a dark face, stern, and yet marked with a certain refinement.

By occupation he was a fisherman, he said, though there were whispers that he made more money in avoiding the revenue laws than in catching fish.

The other occupant of the cabin, for there were but two, was a maiden of eighteen, and she deserves more than passing notice, as she is destined to figure in these pages as a heroine.

Juan Gito was the name of the fisherman, and his daughter he had christened Bessie, after her American mother, whom the girl did not remember, for her father had told her she was lost at sea many years before, having been washed overboard in a storm.

The maiden was certainly strangely unlike her father, for her hair was as golden as the sunshine, and her eyes were dark blue, large and dreamy, while his Spanish nationality no one would for a moment have doubted.

Her form was graceful, elegant, and yet there was an indication of lionine strength and

activity in her every motion, for she had been taught from almost infancy to row and sail a boat, swim, ride horseback, and was an adept in all the accomplishments it was the pride of a man to possess.

When returning with her father from New Orleans, for she occasionally went with him there, if a gale sprung up and it was her trick at the helm, for she took her turn as he did, he would not leave his bunk, should he be sleeping, unless summoned on deck by her, so great was his confidence in his daughter to pull through any ordinary danger.

Folks said—but then there are always busy-bodies to say anything—that Gito dressed his daughter more like a lady than a fisher-girl, for she wore silks and laces, and her ears and fingers sparkled with precious stones.

When spoken to upon the subject, he would say that he spent his money to suit himself, and few persons had the temerity to press the matter further, as Juan Gito was considered to be a dangerous man.

The cabin of the Gitos was six miles from any other habitation, and the only way to reach it was by boat, or along the ridge road, which ran back to the highway over a league distant.

But to ride this road took a skilled horseman, as there were lagoons to swim and these swarmed with alligators, while in one place there was a ravine which had a swinging bridge across it, made of wires, ropes and weather-boarding for planking.

As the bridge swung clear between trees fully sixty feet, with a fall beneath it of as many more, and was only a yard wide, the reader can understand how great was the danger to ride a horse over it; but thisfeat Bessie Gito very often accomplished the darkest night, when returning from the village inland, where now and then she was wont to go.

It was while going to the village one afternoon, some weeks before the opening of this story, that she met with an adventure which well-nigh proved fatal to her, and was the turning point in her life.

Mounted upon one of the three very little horses her father constantly kept, though why, people could not understand, as they seemed never to be used other than by the maiden.

The pony did not seem to want to face the dangers of a deep lagoon, for the alligators were seemingly more vicious than usual; but having crossed it under like circumstances, Bessie drew her oilskin skirt close around her, and urged the animal into the stream.

He had swum but half-way across and had thirty yards yet to go, when a monster alligator started for him, and undismayed by the shouts of the maiden, and the report of her pistol, whch she fired almost in his face, he rushed upon the pony and seized him with a terrific grip in his huge jaws.

It was a terrible moment for the young girl, with the struggling pony, the blood flowing from the wounds made by the cruel, knife-like teeth, the shrieks of the doomed animal, snorting of the water master, who lashed his tail furiously, and the sight of others coming to the feast.

With a prayer to the Virgin, for she was a devout Catholic, the brave girl was turning the muzzle of a second pistol she carried against her own heart, preferring that death rather than to be mangled by the hideous monsters, when suddenly she felt a grasp upon her.

At first she believed that she was seized in the rapacious jaws of another savage monster, and her finger touched the trigger.

But the weapon was knocked from her hand, and she was drawn over the bows of a small boat, out of all danger, when a second later it would have been too late.

Bessie had plenty of nerve, and she did not faint, but turned quickly to see who it was that had come to her rescue at such a time.

She saw a handsome young man, and obeyed without a word his stern command:

"Sit down! quick! for the devils may upset the boat."

He seized his oars and a few strokes sent him out of all danger, and then he said:

"You were silly to ride into the stream, and I had a hard pull of it to save you."

"Do you live on the coast?"

She liked not his haughty, imperious manner, and answered coldly:

"I am Juan Gito's daughter."

"No; I would not have suspected such loveliness was hidden in this forest."

"Before I left home, several years ago, he

came there to live, and I remember he had a daughter.

"Well, I am lucky to have saved you."

"Yes, you did save me from a fearful death, and I owe you my life, sir, and never will I forget that it is a debt that I cannot repay," she said, with feeling.

"Nonsense; half the world owes the other half their lives."

"But I will row you home."

"May I ask the name of my brave preserver?" she said, modestly.

"I am Mark Mortimer, junior, and I live at The Everglades plantation, three leagues up the coast," was the reply.

Then he continued:

"Now I recall it, I have heard of you, for the fishermen call you the Lady of the Lagoon."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A MASKED VISITOR.

THE time that I now ask my reader to accompany me to the cabin home of Juan Gito was the day previous to the attempt to kidnap Mabel Mortimer.

Upon the piazza of the little cabin sat Bessie, the pretty daughter of the fisherman, dressed in pure white and looking thoroughly the lady, in spite of dwelling upon a lagoon, and being the daughter of a toiler of the sea.

Spying a small boat coming toward the little basin, where the vessels belonging to Gito were kept, Bessie kept her eye upon it until it landed.

A close inspection proved to her that the boat was evidently in disguise, for a kind of canvas covering, painted black, concealed its color and in a great part its shape, and yet the disguise would not be detected at fifty yards distant.

There was but one person in the boat, and he held the oars, and sprung ashore when it landed.

Then, to Bessie's surprise, she saw that he was closely masked.

Calling to her father, she told him of the strange visitor.

Juan Gito was engaged within doors in studying a map, and coming out upon the piazza, he said, as soon as his eyes fell upon the stranger:

"Caramba! who is he?"

"One who is afraid to show his face, father, at any rate," returned Bessie, renewing her embroidery, which the sight of the masked visitor had interrupted.

"Well, we shall soon see."

"You step inside, Bessie, and command him, be he a foe."

The maiden went into the cabin, took up a gun, and going to a window, stood where she could command a full view of the piazza.

The next instant the strange visitor arrived at the steps.

He was a heavily-built man, clothed in black, and a satin mask covered his face, neck and beard completely.

"You are Juan Gito?" he said, in a deep voice.

"That is what I am called," replied the Spaniard.

"Are you alone?"

"No, for I have a friend near."

"I wish to see you alone."

"What is your business with me?"

"You love gold?"

"Only fools do not."

"You wish to make a snug pile for yourself?"

"Certainly, if I can make it honestly."

The masked visitor laughed rudely, and said:

"Juan Gito, you speak the word honestly as though it blistered your tongue."

"But I have gold for you, if you care to make it."

"What am I to do?"

"If you are alone I will tell you."

Juan Gito glanced quickly toward the window where stood Bessie, gun in hand, concealed by the curtain, and then gave a decided wink at his visitor, while he said in a loud voice:

"Look you, stranger, because I live here on this lagoon, they tell strange stories of me, and you may be one who believes them, and have come here to tempt me with gold to do some act of deviltry."

"My answer to you is that I will accompany you to your boat, and if you are not out of range within five minutes, the consequences must rest upon your head."

"Come, sir."

The stranger turned without a word, muttering:

"I guess I am mistaken in my man."

"I know you are, sir," returned the fisherman, sternly, and as they moved away out of earshot, he continued in a low tone:

"Now name your terms and work, and lose no time."

"I want some men you can trust for a delicate work," said the other, without turning his head, as he walked along.

"What is the work?"

"To kidnap Miss Mabel Mortimer, and put her to death."

"Ho!"

"I mean it."

"She is a good girl."

"Then she should die young, according to Scripture; but she must be kidnapped, and at night drowned, and her body placed upon the beach near her home."

"This is nasty work."

"I am ready to pay for it."

"How much?"

"I'll give you one thousand dollars, and you can pay them what you please."

"Make it two thousand."

"I cannot."

"Then I cannot do the work."

"Two thousand it is then."

"Another thing, why not keep her away and not kill her."

"She must die."

"You know best; but when do you wish it done?"

"At once."

"And her death appear as accidental drowning?"

"Yes; for you can let her boat be near her on the beach, and capsized."

"Yes. Now give me the money."

"I have but a thousand now. The balance I will give you when the work is done."

"Who are you?"

"That does not interest you."

"Then how am I to know whether to take your word?"

"You must take it."

"No, I don't kill on credit."

"It is all I can do now."

"You wear a ring there I will hold as security."

The masked visitor drew the elegant solitaire from his finger with a sigh, and handed it to him with the remark:

"Now, if you fail to do the work I will kill you."

Juan Gito laughed, but said:

"I will not fail you."

"Now go!"

The visitor sprung into his boat and rowed away, and returning to the cabin, where Bessie sat awaiting him, Juan said:

"My child, that is a very bad man, and I gave him to understand that Juan Gito was not one of his stripe."

"There was something in his voice, father, which led me to believe we knew him; but I could not trace who he was, and I am glad you acted as you did," she replied, with little thought that she was being deceived.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A STRANGE COMPACT.

In one of the best of the sumptuous rooms of The Everglades mansion devoted to the use of guests sat Frank Forrester, upon the night following the delivery of the letter to Percy Wyndham by the quadroon, Fidele.

The brow of the yachtsman was unclouded, as usual, as he sat gazing out upon the starlit waters; but the lamplight shining full in his face failed to reveal the pleasant smile which seemed habitual to him.

Presently there came a knock at the door, and rising, Mr. Forrester opened it.

It was Mark Mortimer who entered, and he wore a troubled look upon his handsome though sinister and dissipated face.

"Well, Mark, what news?" and the smile came back to Mr. Forrester's lips.

"None, and I am in ill-humor," petulantly said the young man.

"Why so, my friend?"

"Well, for various reasons."

"You should never allow yourself to be fretted at anything."

"At best, our lives are very short, and worry and care only shorten them."

"Take the world as you find it and use it as you can."

"That is all very fine, Forrester, to a man like you, who has nothing to worry him."

"And excepting the death of your father—still unavenged by the way—you should have nothing to worry you, for you have an elegant home, plenty of slaves, a large income from your estate, and fine prospects."

"You little know of what you are talking, Forrester."

"I am in sore trouble, and soon it will be known."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'll tell you just how I am situated."

"And I shall listen with pleasure, for to see you moody makes me blue."

"Well, to begin, I am fearfully in debt."

"Is that all?"

"No, for I owe much more than the ten thousand you hold my notes for."

"You have been extravagant."

"The fact is, my father helped me out of trouble frequently, but he always charged it to my share of the property, and the fact is I got all that was due me, taking it in money, and his will leaves to Mabel, my sister, the entire estate, negroes and all, and I am a pauper. Now you know what it is that troubles me."

"Does your sister know this?"

"No, she thinks that we share it together."

"That is good."

"But she must soon know the truth, as the will gives all to her at sixteen, and she is nearly that now."

"In case of her death, who would get it?"

"I would."

"Ah! but can you not prevail upon her to allow you to manage for her, until you can recuperate your losses out of her money?"

"My father appointed Mr. Massey, Merton Massey, her guardian, and yet, strange to say, put it in his will that if she married without my consent her property should go—"

"To you of course?"

"No, to charity."

"Ah!"

"Yes, my father wanted her to marry old Massey's son, Morgan Massey, and so did I, for he is a fine fellow and rich, and to force it upon her, in case of his death, he left his will in that way, knowing my desire was the same as his for a husband for her."

"But will she refuse to marry him?"

"I expect so, though I do not know."

"She has shown no love for Mr. Morgan Massey then?"

"She likes him, and he loves her."

"But does she love any one else?"

"I am not sure."

"You think so?"

"Yes, Forrester, humiliating as it is for me to confess it, I fear she is interested in that accursed murderer, Percy Wyndham."

"And is he interested in the sister of that accursed murderer, Mark Mortimer?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Simply, that as you got the benefit of having fought a fair duel with Captain Wyndham, give him like credit in his meeting with your father, and do not call him by such a harsh name as murderer."

Mark Mortimer winced under the rebuke, but said with sarcasm:

"It is strange that you take up for the boy."

"I believe in justice even to an enemy, though I am not saint enough to always act as I believe."

"But, speaking of your idea regarding your sister's liking for Mr. Wyndham, have you any proof?"

"None, other than that she will not allow me to speak against him before her."

"That is natural, for though he took her father's life, he saved hers: but I have some better proof than that, I think."

"Indeed! tell it me."

"The night I returned from my last cruise, I saw your sister's maid leave the mansion in a suspicious way, and go down to the boat landing.

"I followed and watched her, and saw her enter a light boat and row up the coast toward Lakelands."

"The deuce you did!" cried Mark Mortimer angrily.

"Yes, and I hailed the yacht, and sent a trusty man to watch her."

"Well?"

"But it was not well."

"Quick! tell me the result."

"The girl returned in about two hours, and passed by me to go into the house."

"She looked anxious, and fatigued, and I heard her voice and your sister's conversing earnestly together for a long time after."

"This is strange."

"But the strangest part is yet to tell."

"Ab yes, you sent your man to watch her?"

"I did, and to-day the boat was found adrift near the beach, in it was a broken oar and signs of an evident struggle, but the man was nowhere to be found."

"You surprise me, Forrester."

"I was surprised myself, for Brace was a man few could handle."

"I will call Fidele at once and whip the truth out of her."

"You will do no such thing, for that would spoil all, and besides the girl belongs to your sister and not to you."

"What shall I do then?"

"Watch and wait, and see what else we can discover."

"This you tell me, Forrester, gives me but further cause for trouble instead of freeing my mind from worry."

"Ah yes, you are financially embarrassed, I believe you said."

"You know it."

"Name the sum."

"Forty thousand dollars will clear me."

"That much?"

"Well, within a few thousand of it."

"What do you consider your sister's inheritance worth?"

"Two hundred thousand, and over."

"She can get this by marrying only with your consent?"

"Yes."

"Then sign a contract giving her to me as my wife, and I will hand you fifty thousand in gold, when I have the paper in my hand."

Mark Mortimer sprung to his feet, crying:

"Good God! do you mean this?"

"I do, for I love the young lady devotedly, and that is saying a great deal for me."

"But she does not love you."

"Never mind, I'll look after that myself, if you sign the paper."

"Fifty thousand you said?"

"Yes."

"Payable at what time?"

"To night."

"It is a compact, draw up the paper."

It was done, signed, and the notes paid over then and there.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE PIRATE.

THE man whom Percy Wyndham had made prisoner, the night of the chase after Fidele, was considerably alarmed at the predicament in which he found himself, and when Uncle Toby visited him the following morning with a substantial breakfast, he felt in no humor to talk.

"Say, old man, what am I held for?" he asked.

"I reckon you know better than I do," was Uncle Toby's cautious reply.

"I did nothing."

"Master seems to think different."

"Well, I guess you'd like to make a neat little sum of money?"

"No, for I has all I want for me and the old woman, and my gal Phoebe hain't going to suffer any."

"But say you could get a hundred dollars in hard gold, would you take it?"

"For doing what, sah?"

"Just leaving that door unlocked to-night."

"No, sah, hard gold, or soft gold, c'u'dn't tempt me to deceive my master."

"Why, man, I might give you enough to buy your freedom."

"I don't want my freedom, sah."

"I have all I want, and my master and mis-tis are always good to me."

"No, sah, you is talking foolish, and your words are but idle wind to old Toby."

"Well, tell your master I wish to see him, and I'll see what I can do with him."

"I guess it's what he'll do with you," said Uncle Toby, as he took his departure.

At dinner-time he told the prisoner that his master would see him that night, and not before.

And after dark a little while Percy Wyndham went to the lock-up.

"Well, sir, you wanted to see me?" he said, sternly.

"Yes, I wanted to know what you intended doing with me?"

"I have not made up my mind whether I shall hang or shoot you," was the stern reply.

The man started, for he did not know how near in earnest Percy Wyndham might be.

"How have I wronged you, messmate?" he asked.

"You played the spy on the actions of a girl, and threatened her life and attempted mine, and it depends upon you, whether I turn you over to the law to deal with, or you go free."

"That is what I sent for you for, sir," said the man, politely.

"Ah! you have terms to offer?"

"I have."

"Well, what are they?"

"If the information I give you is worth it you will release me?"

"Yes."

"And give me a thousand in gold?"

"You value your information most highly."

"I know what it is worth."

"Well, tell me what you have to say, and I will give you your terms, if I consider your information worth them."

"Have you ever heard of the Skeleton Schooner?"

"Ha! what know you of that pirate craft?" cried Percy, quickly.

"Remember, I am to go free?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know all about the Skeleton Schooner."

"This is indeed news."

"Worth my freedom and the thousand, eh, messmate?"

"That depends upon what else you know."

"Ask your questions, sir, and I'll answer them."

"Tell me all you know of the Skeleton Schooner?"

"She is a pirate."

"That the world knows."

"She is as fleet as any keel afloat."

"So it is said."

"She carries a full complement of guns."

"She must, to have beaten off the vessels of war she has."

"And a large crew."

"Evidently."

"Her captain is a perfect sailor."

"No one doubts that."

"And has the courage of a lion."

"Yes, that is admitted, pirate through he be."

"They say he is awful rich."

"He has stolen enough to be, and killed men enough to float his vessel in their blood."

"Yes, messmate, he is a terrible man, has a terrible vessel, and a crew that obey his every look."

"All this you know?"

"I do."

"Are you a pirate?"

"I am."

"Then I am more than happy in securing you."

"Yes, but you will release me."

"I think not."

"If you do, and give me the one thousand I ask for, I will sell you the Skeleton Schooner."

"Sell her to me?"

"Yes, I will betray her."

"Do this, and you are a free man," eagerly said Percy Wyndham.

"I will do it, and now I tell you the Skeleton Schooner is not five leagues from here."

"Where is she?"

"Repairing damages in a lagoon."

"How long has she been there?"

"Two days."

"How long will she remain?"

"A week, or more."

"Will you take me to where I can see her?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-night."

"How shall we go?"

"Run along the coast in one of your sail-boats, carry a pirogue along with paddles, and I will pilot you through the lagoons to where you can see her for yourself, and then all you have to do is to raise a crew to take her where she lies, as soon as you can get the men together."

"I will go with you, captain, but I'm to be known as an honest man, you know."

"I'll protect you; but as I go with you tonight alone, I shall handcuff and gag you, to be on the safe side."

"As you please, captain, for I don't wonder

you doubt me; but I'm honest in giving up pirating, now I have about money enough saved to keep me honest on shore."

"Well, we will lose no time, so I will iron you now, and gag you only when we reach the lagoon, where you say the Skeleton Schooner lies."

"Here are my hands, captain," and the man held them crossed before him for the irons.

CHAPTER XL.

THE PIRATE'S FATE.

PERCY WYNDHAM turned to take a pair of handcuffs from a nail on the wall, and, as he did so he received a stunning blow on the head that felled him to the brick flooring of the lock-up.

And then, over his prostrate form, waving the iron handcuffs, which he had before secured for his murderous acts the self-confessed pirate bounded, and fled away like the wind.

But almost instantly Percy Wyndham arose to his feet, slightly dazed by the blow, but which had been broken by his felt hat and a large silk handkerchief which he had in it.

Passing his hand over his brows, to collect his scattered senses, he then sprung quickly across the room to another door, which he unlocked with a key taken from his pocket, and threw open.

A loud yelping greeted him, and the dim light of the lamp showed two enormous bloodhounds* chained to the wall.

Without hesitation he stepped up to them, striking them sharply and commanding sternly:

"Down, Death! Be quiet, Devil!"

In an instant he unfastened their chains, and leading them by their collars to the prison-room, he gave them the scent of the fugitive, and with threatening yelps they bounded away and disappeared in the darkness, while Percy Wyndham, as he followed them, said grimly:

"With Death and the Devil after him, he is doomed!"

Down to the beach with the speed of a deer the man sped along, and reaching it, stopped to look for a boat.

But seeing none there, and believing that he had killed Percy Wyndham, as had been his intention, he struck off for the pier of Lakelands, knowing well that he would find there a boat which would carry him out to the yacht, and once on its deck he considered himself safe.

But as he turned to go to the pier he descried two dark objects coming toward him with the speed of the wind.

A glance told him what they were, for they came on silently, as a bloodhound runs on a trail.

The sight filled him with horror, and he was almost paralyzed with fright.

To reach the pier would be impossible he knew, for they would catch him before he had gotten half-way to it.

His only course was to take to the water, and he rushed into it, fell, struggled to his feet and ran on, hoping to gain deep water, for the shore slopei out gradually.

But his pursuers were upon his trail, and just as he held hope that a few more steps would carry him into deep water, he stumbled and fell, and ere he could rise the bloodhounds were upon him.

There was one long cry, savage growls, and the work of death went on to the end.

A moment after, Percy Wyndham appeared upon the scene; but he was too late to do more than call the hounds off from the mangled body and set it adrift to go out with the tide.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE MASKED MAN CALLS AGAIN UPON JUAN GITO.

JUAN GITO was cleaning his boats one fine morning, after a blow had passed over during the night, when he descried a boat approaching.

A glance was sufficient to show him that it was the disguised boat and its masked occupant.

He pulled inshore and sprung out near where the fisherman stood.

"Well, senor, you have come to redeem your diamond ring, I suppose," said Juan Gito.

* At that early day bloodhounds were frequently found upon the plantations; but public opinion put down the use of them as barbarous, and it was a rare thing to find one during the later days of slavery on any Southern place, though they are still used in Cuba.

"Yes, I have your money for you; but your hirelings did not earn it."

"I think they did, for they lost their lives."

"By their death you get their share," said the masked man, with a sneer in his tone.

"Yes, for they were only to be paid upon the completion of thir work."

"They were a miserable set of cowards, to let one man defeat the three of them."

"He was no ordinary man, señor, though a boy in years, report has it."

"Bah! any one of them could have mastered him, had he had the courage."

"Rumor has it that the deadliest shot, and one of the bravest men on this coast met his match when he faced young Señor Wyndham."

"To whom do you refer?"

"To Major Mark Mortimer."

"Ah! but I have always thought that duel was not a fair one."

"I believe that it was: in fact I know it."

"You know it?"

"Yes, señor, for I witnessed it, though I was not seen."

"Indeed! and you say that it was a fair duel?"

"As fair as any ever fought: but here is your ring, señor."

"And here is your money."

"Now to business."

"Is there more work to be done, señor?"

"There is work to be done, for you did not accomplish what you were paid for."

"The risks were all taken, but the end was unforeseen."

"Well, I want it done this time."

"Try it again?"

"Yes."

"When, señor?"

"Within the week, and be sure you make a sure thing of it."

"How much?"

"How much what?"

"Money."

"I have paid you, man."

"That was for the other job."

"You demand more?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will give you five hundred more."

"It is not enough."

"I will give no more."

"Why, the risk is greater now, and I guarantee it will be done this time."

"You guarantee it?"

"I do."

"Well, I will make it a thousand."

"I demand the same price as before."

"You are grasping."

"And you cowardly, or you would do the job you pay others to do."

"By Heaven! do you dare call me a coward?"

"Hold, señor! there is no need of trouble between us, for you would surely get the worst of it."

"If you want your red work done, I'll do it for two thousand dollars."

"When you finish your work I will pay you," said the masked visitor, sullenly, as though he would like to spring upon the fisherman, yet dare not, without being certain of the result, for the fact that he had been called a coward seemed to rattle in his heart.

"Return me that ring as security," said the fisherman.

The masked man reluctantly drew it from his finger and handed it to him.

"Now, I expect you to keep your word, sir."

"I will do it within the week."

"Where will I see you to give you proof?"

"Oh, I will know if it is done, and then I will seek you here."

The stranger turned on his heel as he spoke, and getting into his boat pulled away, leaving the fisherman standing upon the beach watching him.

Hardly had he disappeared from sight when a second boat was seen coming toward the little harborage.

It was a small cat-rig boat, and held a single occupant, and the cabin home of Juan Gito was evidently the destination of the one who sailed the little craft.

CHAPTER XLII.

BESSIE'S LOVER.

ABOUT a mile further down the coast from the Gito cabin was another little house, and the abode of a fisherman.

It was by no means as pretentious as was the Gito home, but it was comfortable and well kept, and its owner was a young man who had worked hard for a livelihood.

His father had been a sea-captain, and, dying, had left a wife and one son.

That son, Jean Jewett, was the owner of the cabin referred to, and there he had dwelt with his mother for years.

But the good mother who had taught him the right from the wrong had died and been buried among the magnolias at the back of the cabin.

Living alone, Jean Jewett had sought companionship among a reckless class of men, and, it was said, was going to the bad, until one day, when out fishing, he came upon Juan Gito in his smack, which had been dismasted in a storm.

He took the smack in tow astern of his little sloop and helped the Spaniard to rig her anew, passing several days at the cabin.

And then it was that the beautiful eyes of Bessie Gito went straight to his heart, and he learned to almost worship her.

The maiden had heard of him, and that he was in the downward path, and, like the true woman she was, sought to raise him up.

Jean was a tall, handsome fellow, with an honest, resolute face and pleasant manners, and Bessie could not but admire him, and the two became the best of friends.

The result was that Jean gave up his dissipation and evil companions and devoted himself to his work and to Bessie.

An educated man, and a refined one, in spite of his calling, Juan Gito had taught his daughter much, and for three seasons had had her at the convent in New Orleans until she was justly called by the men of the coast the "Lady of the Lagoon."

But, in spite of her having seen something of the world, Bessie might have believed that she really loved Jean Jewett, and one day have become his wife, had she not met Mark Mortimer under the circumstances which she did.

Then she knew that he, not Jean, was the one man in the world to her.

Now and then Mark Mortimer was wont to come to the cabin for a visit, and he and Bessie would sit on the cliff talking together for hours.

And sometimes the young girl would spring into her sail-boat and go up the coast alone, remaining away for half a day.

But, strange to say, although Jean Jewett had heard that the young planter had saved the life of Bessie, he was not jealous, but thankful to him, and often wished to meet Mark Mortimer to thank him, in his honest way, for the service he had rendered the one he loved so well.

But neither Jean nor Mark Mortimer met, and it was doubtless through the engineering of Bessie Gito that they did not.

Having informed my reader who and what Jean Jewett was, I will now tell him that he was the occupant of the sail-boat which came running in toward the cabin after the departure of the masked visitor.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SKELETON SCHOONER.

"WELL, Jean, my boy, I am glad to see you," cried Juan Gito, as Bessie's ardent lover ran his boat in shore, and springing out, grasped the hand of the fisherman.

He was a trifle over five feet, straight as an arrow, with great broad shoulders, and was neatly dressed, far more so than was his wont, in a suit of white duck pants and blue jacket.

Upon his head was a cap that but half hid the clusters of chestnut curls, and his face was beardless.

He smiled at the welcome of Juan Gito, and asked, quickly:

"How is Bessie?"

"Well, and gone to the village."

The young seaman looked disappointed, and said:

"I came over to see her, Juan, and to see you too."

"Well, you'll have to rest content with my company until Bessie's return, and then we will have tea."

The manner of the fisherman was certainly most friendly, but still Jean Jewett did not seem at home.

It was evident that something troubled him.

"How is fishing up your way, Jean?" asked Gito, after awhile, as the two sat down upon an upturned boat together.

"Good, for I just returned from Mobile, where I carried a load, and got a good price too."

"I thought you looked mighty fine in your new clothes, Jean."

"Better not let Bessie see you in them, or she'll fall in love with you, sure, for you are a deuced fine-looking fellow."

Jean smiled with pleasure, and seemed about to burst out and make some confession that was troubling him; but he hesitated, and changing his mind apparently, he said:

"What do you think I saw on my way home?"

"A whale?"

"No."

"An iceberg in the Gulf?"

"No, Juan."

"A wreck?"

"No; guess again."

"A pirate?"

"Yes."

"No."

"It is true."

"Did she give you chase?"

"No, for I wasn't worth it."

"Nor fire at you?"

"No."

"What colors had you up?"

"The pretty blue flag with its gold fish in the center, which Bessie worked for me."

"Ah! were you near the pirate?"

"Yes, within a quarter of a mile, for she came on me out of a lagoon before I could escape."

"How do you know that it was a pirate?"

"Well, that was plain enough to see, for she not only had her colors flying, but her rig indicated what it was."

"What colors did she show?"

"A black flag at the peak, with a skeleton form in the center."

"By the Padres! but it was the Skeleton Schooner," cried Gito.

"Yes, it must have been that craft, of which I have heard so much."

"What had she at the fore, Jean?"

"A red flag with a skull in the center, out of the sockets of which seemed to come rays of light."

"It was the Skeleton Schooner, Jean Jewett, and you were lucky to escape her, for she is the most fearful craft afloat."

"So I have heard, Juan, and they do say that her captain was kin to the devil, and her crew are evil spirits."

"All true, Jean, I verily believe, for I have seen the Skeleton Schooner several times."

"You have?"

"Yes; but only by night, and she certainly looked then more like the ghost of a vessel than a real one."

"They tell strange stories of her, Juan?"

"Yes, they say if she ever pursues a craft those in it are doomed, and the one who sees her at night, with the light streaming out of her skulls, that his soul will be forever lost."

"How about the daytime, Juan?" and Jean spoke with a tremor in his voice, and considerable anxiety as to what might be his fate, for the young seaman was easily impressed, and believed all stories he heard of the spectral and supernatural sort.

"Oh, you are all right, Jean, if you saw her in the daylight; but come, let us go up to the cabin."

"Let me ask a favor of you first, Juan," blurted out the young man.

"All right, Jean, any money you want up to a moderate amount I can accommodate you with; but don't get back again in your wild, extravagant ways."

"You misunderstand me, Juan, for I don't want any money, as I have laid up a snug sum the last few months, and not a card, or a drop of grog do I touch now, for Bessie asked me not to."

"She's a good girl, Jean."

"She's an angel, Juan, and I came over to-day to ask you to let her be my wife—there, it is out now," and Jean Jewett blushed like a young girl at his boldness.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A SAILOR'S LOVE.

HAVING asked "the favor," as he called it, Jean Jewett stood up and waited for a reply.

As Juan Gito did not reply at once, Jean said nervously:

"Juan, I know I am not the equal of Bessie in money or family, for they do say you have got plenty of gold laid by, and that you are an exiled Spanish noble."

"I am not her equal in education, for I am

* This was at a time when the world was full of superstition, and sailors believed the wildest stories imaginable.

only a rough sailor, and she a lady; but I love her more than all else in the world, and I would die for her this moment, if it was to bring her joy."

"Have you spoken to Bessie upon the subject, Jean?" asked Juan Gito, quietly.

"Not for some time."

"And what said she then?"

"She told me she liked me, and I had better wait a few months and see if my love did not grow cold."

"I have waited, Juan, and my love is stronger than ever for her, so I came over to ask you to let me make her my wife."

He was terribly in earnest, seeming to dread the refusal of the father to sanction the marriage far more than he did the thought that the maiden would not accept him as a husband.

Suddenly a strange light came into the face of Juan Gito, and rising to his feet he looked the young sailor squarely in the face.

"Jean Jewett," he said, impressively, "you profess to love my child?"

"I do love her, Juan, with all my heart and soul."

"She is all I have in the world."

"I will not take her away from you, but live here, and I will do all your work, Juan, for you are getting along in years now, and I am young and strong."

"Jean Jewett," continued the fisherman, "are you willing to prove that you love my child?"

"Indeed I am, Juan."

"In any way?"

"Yes."

"You will do anything I ask of you, to gain my consent to your marriage with Bessie?"

"Yes."

"No matter what I may ask of you?"

"I will do it."

"If it is to risk life?"

"Yes."

"To take fearful chances?"

"I'll take them."

"Suppose it was to kill?"

"Juan, I don't understand you."

"Would you kill any one to gain Bessie's hand?"

"Juan Gito, I love her so dearly I would do anything to win her."

"You will swear to this?"

"Yes, Juan."

"Will you swear, if I give my full consent that Bessie shall be your wife, to do my full bidding?"

"Yes, Juan."

"Kiss this cross and swear it by your hopes that the Skeleton Schooner may never cross your path, and thus doom your soul to be lost."

He held a gold crucifix, as he spoke, before the young seaman, who kissed it with reverence, and said impressively:

"I swear to do your bidding, Juan Gito, be it what it may."

"I swear it by my hope that the Skeleton Schooner may never cross my path to doom my soul among the lost."

"Amen! now I will tell you my wish, Jean Jewett."

"I will do it, whatever it is, Juan Gito," was the low reply, for the young man seemed to feel now that some fearful ordeal was before him.

"You know the plantation of the Mortimers?"

"The Everglades?"

"Yes."

"I do."

"Have you ever seen the young girl, Mabel Mortimer?"

"Yes, and she is as beautiful as an angel, Juan; yes, even though I love Bessie as I do, I believe that Miss Mortimer is more lovely."

"When did you see her?"

"I put into the haven once, under stress of weather."

"How long ago?"

"Several years ago, when my mother was alive."

"And you saw her then?"

"Yes, I saw her on the pier and asked if I was intruding, and she smiled so sweetly and said no."

"Then she sent me down to the pier a most magnificent dinner, with wine and fruit, and in the afternoon she came again herself and asked me all about myself."

"I tell you, Juan, I seemed to be talking to

a little angel, and when I told her my mother was sick, she said she would fix up a basket of nice things to send her, and oh! such a lot of things she did send down aboard my boat."

"It took two negroes to carry them."

"Have you seen her since?"

"No."

"But you would know her if you saw her again?"

"Anywhere."

"Jean, do you believe in witches?"

"Yes, Juan," and the young seaman shuddered.

"Well, our house had a visit from a witch the other night."

"Oh, no, Juan," and Jean Jewett turned pale.

"Yes, and I was the one the witch came to see."

"You?"

"Yes."

"You will die, Juan?"

"Yes, if I do not obey the witch."

"What did she tell you to do, Juan?"

"She said that there were many who loved my daughter, and that I could only find out the one whom she ought to marry, by seeing if he would take oath to obey my command."

"I did that, Juan," eagerly said the young seaman.

"Yes, but you have not obeyed it yet."

"Oh, but I will, for I would be fearfully frightened to see a witch."

"You would have cause to be, Jean; but let me tell you more."

"The witch said that there was one person who must die, for she had become possessed of an evil spirit—"

"The witch, Juan?"

"No, the person who must die."

"Oh?"

"Yes, where she was once good, for the sins of her kindred she had become possessed of an evil spirit, and that it was but just that she must die."

"So it is, Juan."

"And Jean, I was told to order the one who was to marry my daughter to do the deed."

"Kill her?"

"Yes."

"I never killed anybody, Juan."

"But the witch commands this."

"And I don't see how I could kill a woman."

"Easy enough, if you go the right way about it."

"I fear not."

"As you please, Jean; but you swore to do my bidding, and your reward will be Bessie's hand; but never mind, there is Tom Carter, Brent, and a number of others will be only too glad."

"Oh Juan, don't speak of them, for I swore, and I will do it."

"Mind you, not one word to Bessie about it."

"Oh no."

"It might break the charm of her love if she knew it."

"I'll never tell her, Juan."

"That is right."

"Who is the victim, Juan?"

"A young girl."

"Where will I find her?"

"You must seek her home from some excuse, get to see her, and in some way get her into the boat."

"Then row her out to sea, and tie her securely so she cannot escape."

"When you are a long way out, untie her, throw her overboard, and then row to the nearest point of land, set her boat adrift, and you come back to your house with all speed."

"I can leave my boat at the point I land, and walk to her home," said Juan,

"Yes, that would be a good idea. But you must tie her, so that she cannot escape, but set her free when you throw her overboard, for it must look as though she was accidentally drowned, and her boat being found adrift will aid in this belief."

"I'll do it, Juan."

"But who is the girl?"

"Mabel Mortimer of The Everglades."

"No! no! no! I cannot do it," and the young man groaned aloud.

"You shall, for you must keep your oath, or the witch will visit you," was the stern reply of Juan Gito.

CHAPTER XLV.

IN A WEB.

"SISTER, I wish to speak with you," said Mark Mortimer pleasantly, one morning a few days after his compact with Frank Forrester.

"What is it, Mark?" asked the maiden, laying down her guitar and facing him, as he came into her room.

"First, I wish to tell you about a strange thing that Fidele, your maid did."

Mabel blushed, but made no immediate reply, other than:

"Indeed?"

"Yes; do you keep as sharp an eye upon her as you might?"

"I think I know of all her movements," was the cold response.

"Did you know that she went, several nights since, to Lakelands?"

"Why Mark, what could she have gone there for?" asked Mabel with an innocence that was remarkable under the circumstances; but she had placed herself upon her guard, feeling that she had to pass through a trying ordeal.

"I thought you could tell me why she went there, Mabel."

"Why how should I know, brother?"

"If you do not, I shall have to have her whipped for leaving the place without leave."

"You will do no such thing, Mark, for Fidele is my slave, not yours, and you have no authority in the matter whatever."

"I am master here now, Mabel, and—"

"Pardon me, but you are not master, for I know that your inheritance you squandered in gambling and riotous living, and that I am mistress here."

He winced under this dead shot, for he had not believed that Mabel had interested herself in the affairs of the estate, but this seemed to imply that she had, and most thoroughly too.

"I do not deny your claim, Mabel, only without a master, all would go to ruin here very soon, and I wished to be the head, until I completed my arrangements for going elsewhere to make my fortune, for, as you hint, I am a mere pauper."

"No, no, brother, as long as I have a home it is your home, only don't try to rule me as you would a slave, for my spirit won't brook it."

"If Fidele went to Lakelands, as you say, I shall find out from her, and if it was not to see some of the slaves, I shall give her to understand that she must be careful how she does so again."

"But the worst part, Mabel, is that a man who saw her followed her, and since then he has not been seen alive, but his body was found to-day, fearfully mangled, as though torn by bloodhounds."

"This is awful, brother; but who was the man?"

"One of the crew of the Lantern."

"Did Mr. Forrester send him after Fidele as a spy?"

He saw her look and manner, and at once took upon himself the blame by saying, for fear the truth would injure Forrester's prospects:

"No, I sent him, as there was no slave near I could call on."

"How do you account for his fearful end?"

"I only wish I knew."

"Have you tried to find out?"

"I have."

"Perhaps the plantation bloodhounds were loose—I know they escape sometimes—and found him on the beach and attacked him," suggested Mabel, innocently, though she was really deeply distressed to learn of the sad end of the man who had played the spy upon Fidele, for the quadroon had told the whole story to her mistress.

Could Percy Wyndham have so cruelly ended the life of the man? she thought.

No, she could not, would not believe it of him.

The man had escaped doubtless, and knowing the harm he could do her and him, he had without doubt set the dogs on his trail, and they had done their work but too well.

Such would she believe was the case.

"Well, Mabel, I have something else to speak to you about," said Mark Mortimer, who had watched his sister most attentively while he spoke of the fate of the spy from the Jack-o'-lantern, yet had discovered no trace on her face that she knew more than she would admit.

"Well, brother?" she responded, quietly.

"How do you like my friend Frank Forrester?" he abruptly asked.

"He is very elegant in his manners, handsome, is very kind to me, and I like him; yet he seems to me to be a man a pure maiden might fear rather than love."

"Well, you are getting along, sis, for that speech was worthy some old woman; but Frank is an elegant fellow, and he loves you devotedly."

"Loves me?"

She spoke with intense surprise.

"Yes, with all his heart."

"But I am only a child."

"You are old enough to have already had offers of marriage from Morgan Massey and several others."

She blushed, but made no reply, and her brother continued:

"Massey is a good fellow, sis, but he is not the man for you."

"Forrester is a dashing, noble-hearted fellow, and the very man to make you happy, and I hope you will accept him."

"He has not asked me to do so."

"But he will, for, like the true man he is, he came first to ask my consent, knowing that our father—for Mr. Massey told him—had left the right to me to bestow your hand."

"It was strange that my father never thought that I would like to have a choice," said Mabel, bitterly.

"He felt that I would only select for you a man you could love and honor, and such a one is Frank Forrester."

"Where does Mr. Forrester live, Mark?"

"Mostly upon his yacht, cruising, for he is an untiring yachtsman; but he has an elegant suit of rooms in New Orleans, where he lives when on shore."

"Where is he from?"

"Boston, I believe, is his native place; in fact, I know that it is, for he belongs to a fine old family there."

"Do you know much about him?" persisted Mabel.

"Yes, he was a middy on a war vessel during the war with England for a while, and was promoted for gallantry to be second officer on a privateer."

"At the close of the war he was not eighteen and possessing a large fortune, built a yacht and cruised northward."

"He is rich, then?"

"Very rich."

"And it is your wish that I marry him?"

"Yes, Mabel."

"Well, as I do not love any one, and Mr. Forrester is your friend, Mark, and you can control my marriage in a measure, if I care for my inheritance, which I do, I will promise to do as you deem best for me."

Without another word, Mabel left the room, little dreaming what a web was being woven in which to insnare her, for, not really knowing what love was, feeling that the one person she could love was divided from her by a gulf neither could ever cross, she was willing to be led to the sacrifice, never dreaming what that sacrifice might be.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PLOT TO DESTROY.

"WELL. Mark, what said your fair sister?" The question was put by Frank Forrester, who lolled in an easy-chair in his room, puffing large curls of tobacco-smoke up toward the ceiling.

Mark Mortimer had just entered his room, and he knew that he had been having a talk with Mabel.

"She said, as she loved no one, but liked you better than any one else, if asked by Mr. Frank Forrester to become his wife, she would consent."

"Bravo! then our idea that she cared for Wyndham was wrong?" said Mr. Forrester, with more excitement of manner than he was wont to exhibit.

"Yes, wholly so."

"But when will the fair beauty honor me with her hand?"

"That you must arrange between you; but as my father has so recently died, I must ask that you await some little time."

"I will be pleased to acquiesce wholly in the wishes of Miss Mortimer."

"Will you go North to live after you have married, for I believe you said you would give up your roving life now?"

"Yes, so I said, and I shall do so, but I shall not go to Boston to live."

"Indeed! where then?"

"Why, right here, of course; for, what more lovely spot, unless it be Lakelands, yonder."

"You will live here?" gasped Mark Mortimer.

"Certainly, for is it not the home of my intended bride?"

Mark Mortimer bit his teeth, for he had an idea that he would be left full monarch at The Everglades, and was already building up *Castles d'Espagna* of the life of delight he intended to lead.

"I thought you would go to Boston," he faltered.

"By no means, Mark, for this is the very place to live and love."

"Behold yonder blue waters, and see how beautiful are they to sail over."

"See yonder white beach, like a belt of silver dividing land and sea, and look at the dark emerald background of the picture, with here and there the lordly home of wealth and refinement."

"If we want gay society we can sail to New Orleans."

"If we wish a dreary existence, undisturbed by the busy whirl, we will have it here."

"No, Mark, we will not leave the dear old plantation."

Every word which Frank Forrester had thus uttered cut the selfish, designing young man to the heart.

But what could he do?

Seemingly enjoying the discomfiture of Mark Mortimer, the yachtsman continued:

"You have fared well, Mark, for you have spent your fortune, and the money I paid you gives you a large bonus above your debts."

"If you get down in the world let me know, and I will place you in a way to make gold until you are sick of handling it, for that seems to be your God, Mortimer."

"I love gold only for what it will bring."

"My word for it, you will never purchase any happiness with it."

"But excuse me while I seek my fair lady-love, for I am eager to know when she will make me the happiest of men."

He arose and left the room, and, not finding Mabel in the parlor, sent a servant to ask her to join him on the lawn.

She soon came down, looking exquisitely lovely, but with eyes that plainly showed they had been shedding tears.

"Mabel, if so I may address you," he began, in his soft, winning way, taking her hand and leading her to a rustic seat that contained a view of the waters, "your brother has told you of my offering, through him, to you of my heart, hand and fortune, and your answer has made me a very happy man, for to be loved by you, Mabel, is happiness I scarcely dared reach in this world."

She waited until he had finished his well-turned sentence, and then said:

"Understand me, Mr. Forrester, I said I would become your wife and trust to learning to love you, for I do not dislike you; but at present I do not love you."

"Now go and join Mark, please, and leave me alone, for I wish to think."

He bowed in assent, but asked:

"May I not set a day on which the ceremony is to be performed?"

"Yes, sir, in six months from to-day."

"So long?"

"Yes, for I will not be married until I am sixteen, and the day I set is my birthday anniversary."

He bowed again and turned away, and she strolled down to the end of the lawn.

She wore a dress of pure white, that became her style of beauty, and as it was a robe for the house, she was about to return to the mansion to change it and then take a walk to her father's grave, when she saw a boat pulling close along shore.

At first she did not recognize the occupant, but as he turned his face toward her she saw that it was one whom she had befriended some time before.

"Ah! are you back again to see us?" she called out, in her childish way.

The man sprung ashore, and, glancing up at her, said, earnestly:

"Yes, miss. You are Miss Mortimer, who treated me so kindly when I was last here, and sent those nice things to my poor mother?"

"Yes, I am the one, but I was a little girl then, for that was several years ago."

"How is your mother?"

"She is dead," and as he spoke his lips quivered and his eyes drooped.

"You said your name was Jean, didn't you?"

"Yes, miss, Jean Jewett."

"And do you live in the same place down the coast?"

"Yes, miss," and the man seemed greatly embarrassed and kept his eyes roving about continually.

"You seem troubled?" she said, noticing his manner.

"I am miss."

"Can I aid you in any way?"

He was silent, and she continued:

"See, the sun is setting, and yonder clouds look as though we were going to have a blow, so you had better stop at The Everglades all night."

"Thank you, miss; but do you see yonder point of land?" and he pointed to a projection of the beach a mile distant.

"Yes."

"Well, miss, I left a dying comrade there while I came in search of a priest."

"There is no priest here, and none nearer than the village, which is miles away."

"But I will call for aid, and see what can be done for your friend."

"No, no, miss; he is dying from a wound he received, from a vessel, a pirate, I think, who fired at us while we were fishing."

"I sought to bring him here but the motion of the boat caused him great pain, and I left him there."

"I will call for aid at once."

"No, no, miss, only your sweet face will be like an angel to him in his dying hour, and it will be far better than a priest."

"You are educated, lady, and you know what to say to a dying man, so come with me I beg of you."

"Let me first call to some one to accompany me," she said, deeply touched by the story of the man about his dying friend.

"Ah no, lady, I beg of you not to delay, for my friend might die."

"Come, I implore you, and I will bring you back ere very long."

He seemed so earnest, so anxious about his dying comrade, that Mabel Mortimer had not the heart to refuse, and instantly she descended the bank to the beach, and a moment after sat in the stern of the boat, which was pulled with swift, strong stroke over the waters, now under the shadow of twilight.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE CRIME.

STRAIGHT to the point the man rowed, and in ten minutes landed near where he said his dying friend was.

It was now dark, and the heavens were becoming overcast, and there was every indication that there was a storm coming on.

But having ventured thus far, Mabel would not retrace her way without seeing the dying man, and it was her intention to have his comrade bear him to the boat, and carry him back home with her.

As a child will often do, she had taken a fancy to the young sailor whom she had met several years before, and felt not the slightest dread of him.

In spite of her former sad experience, when she barely escaped being borne off, no thought of danger to herself entered her mind.

"Come, we must hasten, and if your friend lives, we must take him with us, for the storm will break soon, and it would kill him to remain unsheltered here," she said hastily.

He sprung ashore, and then turned to aid her.

She grasped his hands, to spring out upon the sands, when she felt her arm in a gripe of iron.

Then, ere she could comprehend what was meant, a scarf was thrown around her face and drawn so tightly that to cry out was impossible, and even had she done so, in that lonely spot, with the wash of the rising waves and sighing of the winds, she could not have been heard half the distance to The Everglades.

With a strength and celerity that was remarkable the man bound poor Mabel, and lifting her in his arms bore her back to the stern-sheets.

Here he placed her, and then bound her securely to the seat, and then took the scarf from around her face.

She did not cry out and she had not fainted; but she said indignantly:

"How dare you thus treat me."

He pushed the boat off the sands, secured his oars, and heading seaward in the very face of the coming storm, said earnestly:

"I am sorry, oh so sorry, to thus ill use you, lady, but I must do so."

"Why must you commit crime?" she asked.

"My oath forces me to do so, for it does seem like a crime against you."

"It is a crime and one that shall be severely punished, as you will find out."

"You are brave to think you will escape; but you cannot."

"Do you intend to sink this boat?"

"Oh, no, I could not do that, for it is a life-boat, and can ride out this storm."

"Whither are you taking me?"

"Where I am bid."

"Ah! you serve a master in doing as you do?"

"I serve myself, and keep my oath, lady."

"Speak, sir! where do you take me?"

"To your doom."

He spoke impressively, and it made her shudder, and almost lose heart.

But she said:

"That implies that you intend to kill me?"

"I do."

"How have I ever wronged you?"

"In no way."

"On the contrary you befriended me, but duty must be done."

"And you deceived me about your dying friend, simply to get me into your power?"

"Yes, I came here alone, for the purpose of kidnapping you, and I succeeded far better than I expected."

"Is it money you wish to release me?"

"No, I would not touch one dollar of your gold."

"Some one else pays you then for your work?"

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"The witch."

"What witch?" she asked, in a whisper.

"The one who bade me kill you."

"Great heavens! do you mean to say that witches have ordered you to kill me?"

"Yes, one witch did, and I must obey."

"I am sorry, oh, so sorry, but I must do my duty."

"Good God! I am in the power of a madman!" she groaned, and her head dropping forward upon her knees she burst into tears.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE PUNISHMENT.

THE oarsman of the life-boat, whom the reader has without doubt recognized as Jean Jewett, the superstition-crazed seaman, had not pulled a quarter of a mile from the shore when the winds increased to half a gale, causing the little skiff to dance like a feather upon the rising waves.

At last he said slowly, but in a voice loud enough to reach the ears of the young girl:

"I did expect to bring you out to die, in your own boat, so that the people of The Everglades, would think you had gone off on the waters for a row and been drowned."

"But seeing you as I did, I dared not miss the chance of getting you into my power, so brought you in the life-boat, and now I will have to take you ashore, when you are dead, and leave you on the beach, and get your own boat and put it near you."

"Now you know your fate, lady."

"And would you thus murder me?" asked Mabel, in a terrified whisper.

"Yes."

"Have you no mercy?"

"Yes; my heart bleeds for you."

"Then why stain your life with so foul a crime?"

"Because it is so ordered."

"And by whom?"

"The witch."

"Man, you are mad?"

"There are no such things as witches," said Mabel, indignant at his superstition.

"Oh, yes, there are witches, and you will rue it for saying there are none," he answered doggedly.

"Do you ever expect to have one night of quiet rest?"

"Do you think your conscience will ever be stilled?"

"Do you not know that my face and form will rise ever before your eyes, if you so cruelly, coldly put me to death?" she said, in tones that should have touched him.

But instead, he answered:

"Oh, I'll not be haunted by any dreams, and I'll not be frightened if I do see you at night sinking down into the waters, for the witches order, and men must obey; while, if I commit crime, they bear the sin."

"Oh, man! creature, brute, or whatever

you be, have mercy upon me!" she cried in bitterest agony.

"No; I cannot."

"And will not?"

"And will not."

"Then Thou, oh, God! desert me not to the power of this madman!"

"Thru his brain from its madness, that his eyes may see into his heart the red crime he would stain it with."

"Thou, God, that rulest the storm, have mercy upon Thy poor child, I beseech, for I am all alone, excepting Thou in Thy mercy save me from death."

As she held up her head, and the fervent prayer burst from her lips in clear, distinct, pleading tones, the man ceased rowing and trembled violently.

He gazed at her with a look akin to horror upon his face, and then he essayed to speak, as though he would break the charm of her prayer.

But in vain, for his tongue seemed glued within his teeth, and he could utter no word or cry.

As she ceased he glanced at her with a fixed stare, until with a terrified shriek he sprung to his feet, dropping the oars, and with arms stretched out before him, he cries:

"God above! it is the Skeleton Schooner, and I am doomed!"

"Outraged Heaven! have mercy upon me!"

It was no wonder that the wild cry broke from his lips, startling Mabel with its intensity, and causing her to turn her head and glance quickly behind her.

There, not a cable's length away, she beheld what was also an awful sight to her, but it did not strike upon her superstitious fears as upon those of the poor wretch who was now so thoroughly cowed and humbled.

It was apparently the phantom of a vessel, and yet it was not white, but black.

It was a rakish schooner, coming on under considerable canvas, and carrying with her a weird light, that came from what appeared to be human skulls, with streams of fire coming from the sockets.

Upon the masts and ends of the yards were three strange and ghastly lanterns, while one of huge size and greater brilliancy was upon the end of the bowsprit, and cast its strange glare over the waters far ahead.

Her figure-head was a skeleton form, with one bony hand grasping a cutlass, and the same weird light was emitted from its sightless eyes.

By this glare the schooner was distinctly visible, and a large black flag, with a skeleton form, was distinctly visible to the eyes of Mabel, who had to confess to a feeling of horror at the remarkable sight.

Nearer and nearer it came, and the life-boat was dead in its course, and with trembling form Jean Jewett watched her coming.

Confident now that the man was wholly conquered, Mabel was not afraid to trust him further, and only hoped that the pirate craft would pass without seeing them or running down their boat, which certainly seemed most probable.

Nearer and nearer the ghastly craft drew, until, with a loud cry, and the words:

"I am justly punished."

Jean Jewett sprung into the sea and disappeared beneath the waves.

Just at that instant the Skeleton Schooner changed her course a point, and the next instant it had dashed by, leaving the little life-boat rocking in its wake, and Mabel its only occupant.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A CLEVER RUSE.

FRANK FORRESTER sat in the cabin of his yacht, Jack-o'-lantern, a frown and cloud upon his brow.

It was the night following his engagement with Mabel Mortimer, and since his meeting with her she could nowhere be found.

There arose in his mind that she was trifling with him, and had gone off to hide from him, or, perhaps, had really run off with Percy Wyndham, and had told him what she did to allay suspicion of her real intentions.

Her boats were at the pier, her horses in the stable, and no one had seen her after Mr. Forrester had left her on the lawn.

But he determined to seek for the maiden, and find her, and so he went on board his yacht to get all in ship shape for the storm that was brewing, so that he might then return ashore and devote himself to the search.

As he entered his cabin, quick as was his eye, he failed to observe a face suddenly disappear from out of the stern lights.

But a man's face had been there an instant before, and a man was then clinging to the rudder-post.

Hardly had he entered the cabin, when he heard a boat come alongside, and a voice said:

"Captain, a seaman to see you, and he says it's important."

"Come in, my man," called out Mr. Forrester, and a sailor entered, and bowed politely.

"Well, Lomax, what brings you here?" said Mr. Forrester in some alarm.

"This letter will explain, captain," was the answer of the man, who looked haggard and worn.

Frank Forrester broke the seal and read hastily the contents of the letter, and his brow became blank and lips ashen as he read.

"Lomax, are you too badly used up to do something I need you for?" he asked the seaman.

"No, señor captain, I am ready to obey your orders," was the prompt reply.

"Then I will go on shore and write you a letter to my agent in New Orleans, and send it aboard by a messenger."

"Bring them here, captain?"

"No; sail for the Black Lagoon at once, and I will be there, for I shall take a small sail-boat to-morrow night and run there."

"All right, captain."

"Be quick, Lomax, for, as you know, it is most urgent that we get the men."

"I will lose no time going or coming, sir."

Frank Forrester then gave a few orders about getting the yacht all ready to sail, and getting into the boat which the seaman had rowed out in, sculled himself ashore.

Hardly had he gone thirty paces before a form came out of the water, and darted away with the speed of a deer down the beach.

Half an hour passed, and then, at the same rapid run, the man reappeared, and at once darted into the shadow of a small group of pines growing near the beach.

"The yacht is still there, so the messenger has not gone on board."

"How lucky was the thought that made me swim out to the yacht and reconnoiter," and the man again turned toward the mansion, and looked anxiously expectant.

Soon a person was seen approaching at a slow walk.

"By Heaven! it is that negro Duke," said the man in the shadow.

It was in reality Duke, who had so far recovered from his wound that he was able to be about.

But he walked slowly, as though not yet in his former strength.

As he paused near the thicket the man concealed there darted upon him, and he found his throat in a gripe of iron.

Then came a low whistle, and from the shadow of the bank appeared two men.

They were negroes, and approached the pine thicket cautiously.

"Here, take this fellow and keep him a prisoner in the garret until my return," was the low order.

"Yes, master."

"And Toby, you and Caleb guard him day and night, and let him not escape upon your lives."

"Yes, master."

The huge mulatto was then securely bound and gagged, and turned over to the tender mercies of old Uncle Toby and Caleb.

He was greatly alarmed, and suffering from the choking he had received, while he growled savagely, when a bundle of letters were taken from him by his captor.

As Toby and Caleb moved off with their prisoner, the man who had acted so promptly and well in the little game he was playing, got into a boat and rowed boldly out to the yacht.

It was hanging by a single anchor, and Lomax, the seaman, met the man at the gangway.

"You are Boatswain Lomax, I believe?" said the stranger, springing on board.

"Yes, sir."

"I am an old shipmate of the captain, and he sent me on board with these letters for you to deliver, and he says lose no time in getting to sea."

"All right, sir," answered Lomax, politely,

for there was something in the manner of the man that made him respect him.

"And, boatswain, as you have had a hard trip of it, the captain suggests that you seek rest, and leave the yacht to my management."

"Certainly, sir; but are you the new officer he expected to have join us?"

"I am," and turning to the crew of four men on board the yacht, he gave them their orders in a voice that they knew meant should be obeyed, and springing to their posts, in five minutes the yacht was flying away over the rough waters, for the wind was blowing half a gale, and the night looked stormy and wicked.

CHAPTER L.

ADRIFT.

Away darted the Jack-o'-lantern over the dark waters, her weird light showing to her owner, who gazed at her departure from the library window of The Everglades mansion, how swiftly she was flying along on the errand upon which he had sent her.

"She'll make splendid time, Mark, and be back within three days, and to-morrow I will start in one of your small boats," said Frank Forrester, as he turned away from the window, having watched the Jack-o'-lantern out of sight, but little knowing that a stranger was upon her deck of whom he little dreamp't.

On flew the yacht with the speed of the wind, until she went about on the starboard tack, to stand out into the open waters, when the quick eye of the stranger caught sight of something upon the sea.

"It is but the foam of a wave, sir," said one of the crew, as the new commander, who had so quickly taken control, ordered the helmsman to lay the yacht to.

"It is no such thing, sir.

"It is a boat," was the stern reply, and then running forward, he seized a coil of rope and threw it over the object his keen vision had descried.

A loud cry followed, and a human form sprung half up in the boat.

The cry was in a woman's voice, and sent a thrill of horror to the men.

But the new officer quickly dragged the boat alongside, and then seized the form in his arms.

To his amazement he discovered that she was bound fast in the stern of the boat.

The ropes were quickly cut, and the form was tenderly raised in strong arms and borne to the cabin, while the Jack-o'-lantern was once more put on her course.

Once in the cabin, and the man started, for the swinging lamp revealed who it was that he held in his arms.

"Good God! it is Miss Mortimer," he cried.

"Yes, I am Mabel Mortimer," was the low response.

Wine was given her, and then to her rescuer she told her story of that awful trip with the superstition-maddened witch, and of her escape.

Then she was told what yacht it was, and asked for her commander.

"At The Everglades," was the answer.

"And where is the yacht bound?" she asked.

"To New Orleans."

She seemed surprised, and as there was no one in the cabin now but the maiden and himself, the stranger said:

"Miss Mortimer, I am in disguise, for I am Percy Wyndham."

She quickly stifled the cry that arose to her lips, and then said:

"A second time I owe you my life."

"Do not speak of that, I pray you."

"I will speak of it, for it has wiped out the past which I held against you."

"It may seem strange for a daughter to say she forgives the one who killed her father, but I do from my inmost heart forgive you, for I know, from recent papers I saw, your cause."

He bit his lip nervously, though his false beard concealed the act, and after an effort of self-control, said:

"Miss Mortimer, I owe you an explanation for my being on this yacht; but of late I have had cause to suspect her captain, and I have dogged his steps, and to-night learned enough to make me play a bold game to ferret out what secret the Jack-o'-lantern holds."

"This yacht is now bound on that mission, and I am known on her only as the friend of her commander, so I beg of you not to betray me."

"I will put back and land you at The Everglades, if you desire it, but I would rather have

you continue on in the yacht and aid me to run the fox to his den."

"I will go with you, Mr. Wyndham," was the low reply, and leaving the cabin to his fair passenger, Percy Wyndham went on deck with renewed courage to carry out the daring plot he had planned.

CHAPTER LI.

THE STORM.

OVER the high waters bounded the Jack-o'-lantern under her new commander, who anxiously watched the increasing darkness of the clouds and the rising of the sea, for somehow Percy Wyndham seemed to feel that he had more reason to guide the little vessel with greater skill, since he had on board the young girl whom accident had thrown across his path to a second time save from death.

True, she was the daughter of the man whom his mother had slain, and whose death he had with filial love taken upon himself.

And more, she was the sister of Mark Mortimer, who had slain his own father; but in her beautiful face had been no hatred for him, but on the contrary kindness, forgiveness and sympathy in all she felt that he must suffer.

Bound on the mission on which he was, having daringly ventured life to carry out his plot to unravel the mystery of the Jack-o'-lantern and her strange commander, Percy Wyndham yet would not do one act to hazard the life of the young and beautiful passenger in his charge, so he ordered the sails reefed down close, and himself held the helm.

It seemed as if nature frowned upon his daring venture, for blacker and blacker grew the storm-clouds, and higher and higher rose the seas.

But he held the yacht on her course, though forward she was under water continually, and the spray dashed viciously half-way up her mast.

The pitching of the yacht brought Lomax upon the deck, and he saw that the danger was great, so said, to lead the way to a little advice he thought necessary:

"A bad night, sir."

"Yes, a very bad night," was the reply of Percy Wyndham.

"If it gets much worse, I fear the Lantern can't live in it."

"She is a stanch craft, and can live in any storm if properly handled."

Lomax was silenced for the present, but worked his way amidships to where the crew were lashed to the bulwarks.

"A nasty night, boys," he said.

"Nasty, indeed," was the answer, almost in chorus.

"Have any of you sailed with the skipper at the helm?" he asked.

"No."

"None of you?"

None of them had.

"Who is he?"

No one knew.

"I guess the captain must have confidence in him, or he would not have put him in charge."

They all guessed so, too, but it certainly looked as though he was risking much to hold on as he did, and they said so.

"Better go aft, boatswain, and tell him to lay to," said one.

"I don't like to, for he has the look of a man who won't be interfered with."

"Well, if you don't I will," boldly remarked the coxswain.

"Oh, I'll do it if you think best," and, so saying, Lomax walked aft and said:

"Don't you think we had better lay to, sir?"

Before Percy Wyndham could reply, the doors of the companionway opened, and Mabel Mortimer appeared.

"What! Miss Mortimer, you do not intend to face this storm?" he asked.

"Yes, if you will allow me, for it is fearful to remain shut up in the cabin."

"Let me stand just here, please."

"Certainly," answered Percy Wyndham, and she clung to the doors leading into the cabin, and after one glance above at the clouds and around her at the wild waters, fastened her eyes upon him.

A fearful lurch of the yacht just then emboldened Lomax to repeat his question:

"She labors so, sir, don't you think you'd better lay to?"

"When I need your advice, sir, I shall seek it," was the quick, stern rejoinder.

Lomax was repulsed, and after an instant

turned and crept forward once more to report progress, or rather the lack of it.

"Well, lads, if he don't lay to soon I'll speak about it," said the coxswain, while another rejoined:

"Yes, there are shoals about here, if I remember right, and he may be running dead wrong."

"Miss Mortimer, you are not comfortable there."

"Allow me to make you as much so as the circumstances will admit of," said Percy, and in a loud voice he called out:

"Ho, lads! I want a good man at the tiller for a moment."

"Let me go, shipmates, and stand ready to obey orders!" cried the coxswain, and quickly he took the helm.

Then Percy Wyndham put a storm-coat around Mabel, and arranged for her a seat in the companionway, lashing it firmly and securing her to it in such a way that she could not be thrown out or washed overboard.

Hardly had he secured her in the seat and heard her low thanks, when the coxswain, as the yacht was suddenly half drowned forward by a huge wave, sung out:

"Stand ready, lads, to aid me!

"Now I'll lay her to! Ready, all!"

"Villain, how dare you act without my orders!" cried Percy Wyndham, in a voice that rung above the storm, and he sprung toward the helm.

But another of the crew had jumped quickly to aid the coxswain at the tiller, and the latter shouted, while he drew a long knife:

"Avast there! You shall not run us all under by your foolhardiness."

"Do you threaten me?" cried Percy Wyndham.

"I do!" was the bold answer.

"Put this vessel on her course at once."

"I'll not do it."

"Then your life be upon your own head."

A flash and a sharp report followed, and the coxswain fell dead across the tiller.

Following up his advantage, Percy Wyndham sprang forward, hurled the other seaman aside, and seizing the tiller, cried:

"Stand back, men, for we are in the midst of shoals, and I am running the channel, which I know well."

"In half an hour more we will be in deep water, and then I'll bring her to and ride out the gale."

Horrified at the act of the young man, in so promptly slaying their shipmate, and impressed by his manner, the others at once felt that they must obey him, and they slunk back to their posts, Lomax inwardly congratulating himself that he had not been the one to take the reins into his hands.

To show he was not to be trifled with, Percy Wyndham threw the body of the coxswain into the sea, and held the yacht on her course, while Mabel sat gazing at him with awe and wonder.

A run of a league further showed that the gale had blown itself out and seeing that there was no necessity to bring the yacht to, Percy Wyndham held on toward New Orleans, and at his every order the men sprung nimbly to obey, for he had taught them a most severe lesson.

CHAPTER LII.

THE TRAITOR ALLY.

WITH a good breeze all the way, and driven hard by Percy Wyndham, the Jack-o'-Lantern was not long in reaching the lake-shore, from whence communication could be had with New Orleans.

When the place of anchorage was in sight, Percy Wyndham sought Mabel in the cabin and said:

"Miss Mortimer, I am going to the city, as soon as I drop anchor, and will leave you on board, unless you have friends there whose protection you wish to seek."

"No, not if you intend returning, as you said, to the neighborhood of The Everglades," she answered.

"Yes, it is my intention to return there, as soon as I visit the Black Lagoon, where, as I said, I have an important duty to perform."

"Then allow me to go back with you."

"Certainly, if you wish it; but it is my duty to inform you that I will carry back with me a large crew, and my mission is a most dangerous one."

"I have passed through so many dangers

and escaped, I fear nothing that I may meet, especially as you will be my protector," she answered, innocently.

"Then I will gladly take you back in the yacht, and will leave you on board while I ride into the city; but I will return as soon as possible."

The yacht had now run in to her anchorage, and calling to Lomax to accompany him, and leaving one of the three remaining men of the crew in charge, Percy Wyndham rowed ashore, secured a vehicle, and was driven rapidly to the city.

"The captain told you how many men he needed?" he asked quietly of Lomax.

"He did, sir," answered the boatswain, whose respect for Percy had greatly increased, and who, with the others of the crew of the Jack-o'-lantern, felt that the captain had made a good selection in his new lieutenant, for such they believed the young planter to be.

"He told you where to get your men?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we will talk the matter over when we reach the hotel, and then decide what is best to be done," answered Percy, quietly.

Arriving at the hotel, Percy registered a fictitious name for himself, and another for Lomax, and asked for a pleasant room.

Then the two were shown up, and the young planter remarked:

"Now, I will write a note to a gentleman who is most anxious to know of our captain, and when I have had a talk with him, we will set to work."

The note was written and dispatched by a messenger, while Lomax employed the time in gazing from the window down into the busy street.

Presently a knock came at the door, and a gentleman entered, and said:

"Ah, Wyndham, I am glad to see you."

"I came as soon as I got your note."

"Glad to see you, Norton; permit me to introduce you to Mr. Lomax, the boatswain of the schooner."

The two men bowed, and the stranger, whom Percy had addressed as Norton, took a seat.

He was a man of middle age, with a bold, resolute face, and eyed one and then the other with some curiosity in his glance, and seemed rather to wait for the young planter to speak.

After a slight hesitation, Percy Wyndham said:

"Lomax, I told you that I would write to a person who was most anxious to know of your captain, and I have done so, for this gentleman is the commandant of the City Guard."

"Furies! are you a traitor?" and Lomax sprung to his feet, his eyes glaring at the young man.

"Oh! no, for I was never true to the master you serve— Hold! sit down, and rest your hands upon that table, or I will kill you as I did the coxswain last night, but obey me, and I pledge you a pardon."

The man groaned, but sunk down into the chair and did as ordered, while he turned deadly pale.

"Now, Lomax, I know that you are boatswain of the famous pirate craft known as The Skeleton Schooner, and which is also called the Skimmer of the Seas."

Lomax groaned, but made no reply.

"I know the vessel has lately been in action with an American cruiser and was crippled, losing many of her crew, and that she is now lying in a lagoon undergoing repairs, while her captain has sent you here to get half a hundred men to make up her complement."

Still no reply from the astonished and frightened man.

Then Percy Wyndham continued:

"I laid a trap into which you fell, and I now wish to catch your captain and his craft in the same trap; but I need your aid, and if you serve me faithfully, you are free to go with what ill-gotten riches you may have on the schooner."

"But, Lomax, if you refuse now, I will simply kill you, and if you acquiesce now and then turn traitor, I'll hang you to the yard-arm."

"So, sir, what do you decide upon?"

"Life is sweet, sir," said the man in a lugubrious tone.

"Even to a pirate?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you decide in your own favor?"

"Yes, sir."

"And will betray your master and his crew?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have decided wisely."

"He has indeed," said Captain Norton, the Commandant of the Guard, who had received in Percy Wyndham's letter a hint of what he was wanted for.

"Well, first, who is this famous Skimmer of the Seas?"

"He is a gambler ashore?"

"And a pirate on board; but what is his name?"

"He is known as Forrester, sir."

"Frank Forrester?"

"Yes, sir."

"Aha!" said Captain Norton, with a pleased look.

"He spends much time here, does he not?"

"Yes, sir, and in cruising in his yacht, the Jack-o'-lantern, which was captured some time ago, as a smuggler, but which he bought again."

"Aha!" again said the commandant, as though his eyes were being opened upon mysteries which had long puzzled him.

"The men you are sent here to engage, are from a reserve he keeps on hand, are they not?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know where to find them?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can pilot the Jack-o'-lantern back to where the Skimmer of the Seas is hidden in the lagoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"And will do it?"

"If you force me to do so, sir."

"I do not force you; I only suggest what is best for you to do."

"I will do as you say, sir."

"You are wise, my man; very wise," put in the commandant.

"How many men has the Skimmer of the Seas?"

"Now?"

"Yes."

"About thirty on board."

"Then we shall need half a hundred, for I want no failure."

"I can easily get that number from the agent, sir, the captain sent me to," eagerly said Lomax.

But Percy and Captain Norton both laughed lightly, while the former said:

"No, Lomax, it may be a good thing to set a thief to catch a thief, but I'll not risk it in this case."

"The men who are here, you must lead into a trap for Captain Norton to get his hands upon, and he'll take care they don't go upon the high seas as pirates any more."

"Then we will go and take the schooner."

Lomax looked crestfallen, for he had hoped Percy Wyndham would be led into the trap of trusting himself with the crew he had come after, and whom he knew to be as hard a set as ever scuttled a ship or cut a throat.

"All the men you need, Mr. Wyndham, I can furnish you with, and will also be glad to serve as your lieutenant," said Captain Norton.

"Certainly, sir, and it will be well to pick your men."

"Yes, and you need seamen."

"If I can get them, sir, for they understand boarding and fighting on a deck."

"You shall have them, Mr. Wyndham."

"Are you any relation, sir, to Captain Percy Wyndham?" asked Lomax, with considerable interest.

"I am the son of the late Captain Wyndham," said Percy sadly.

"I served under your father years ago, and will tell— But, sir, you and the captain here both give me your pledge to protect me?"

"Certainly."

"Will you give it to me in writing, so that there will be no mistake?"

"You are most particular, my man," said Captain Norton, while Percy said:

"Certainly, if you prefer a signature to a verbal promise."

"Please write then, sir, if I give you full particulars that you wish to know, entrap the reserve crew here for you, and pilot you to where you can capture the Skimmer of the Seas, you will give me full pardon for all my offenses and set me free."

Percy Wyndham rapidly wrote the desired paper, and added:

"And I also put here that you get one thousand dollars of the reward offered by the Government for the capture or destruction of the Skeleton Schooner, while the rest goes to

Captain Norton and his men, for I will not touch a dollar of it."

"Thank you, sir," said Lomax, while Captain Norton answered:

"You are indeed most generous, Mr. Wyndham."

"Now Lomax, what were you going to tell me?"

"It was about your father."

"Well?"

"And the captain."

"What captain?"

"The Skimmer of the Seas," was the low response of the traitor to his pirate shipmates, and ally to their foes.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE PIRATE'S CONFESSION.

"You refer to Captain Frank Forrester?" asked, Percy Wyndham.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what know you of him in connection with my father?"

"You know Mr. Mark Mortimer, sir?"

"Yes," was the low reply, and Captain Norton glanced at Percy to see the effect of the pirate's words upon him.

"He fought a duel with your father?"

"Yes."

"The duel was fought on board your father's yacht and the Jack-o'-lantern?"

"It was."

"And your father was killed?"

"True," was the low reply.

"He fell from the yacht into the sea, and Captain Forrester sprung overboard and saved his body from sinking."

"Did he do this?" quickly asked Percy.

"He did, sir."

"How know you this?"

"I was on the Jack-o'-lantern, sir, at the time."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir, and Captain Forrester acted as the second of both your father and Mr. Mark Mortimer."

"He did."

"But he was the friend of Mr. Mortimer."

"So I know."

"He proved it."

"Man, what do you mean?" cried Percy Wyndham, realizing that Lomax was keeping something back.

"I mean, sir, that he put no bullet in your father's pistol."

The words came distinctly, and they brought a cry from the lips of Percy Wyndham, while Captain Norton sprung to his feet with an oath, losing momentarily his suave manner that seldom deserted him.

"Good God! Do you tell the truth, man?"

"I do, Mr. Wyndham."

"How know you this?"

"I saw the act, sir."

"You saw it?"

"I did, sir."

"One question more."

"Did Mark Mortimer know this?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure?"

"I think not, sir."

"What motive had your chief for this?"

"He was the friend of Mr. Mortimer, who owes him large sums of money, won at cards, I have heard, from the talk in the forecastle."

"Does Mr. Mark Mortimer know the real character of his friend, Frank Forrester?" asked Captain Norton.

"No, sir, he knows him only as a gambler."

"I am glad of that, at least; and, captain, I must beg of you, that though Mr. Mark Mortimer is my foe, his name be not drawn in with this Skimmer of the Seas."

"I ask this as a special favor," said Percy Wyndham.

Captain Norton looked surprised, but answered:

"Certainly, Wyndham, if you wish it; but I think here is a chance to lower the proud head of Mark Mortimer."

"No, I will only fight an enemy openly," was the response, and then Percy Wyndham continued, after an effort to banish the bitter thoughts called up by the confession of the pirate Lomax:

"Now come, let us get to work, for we have much to do!"

"I am ready," answered Captain Norton, and after deciding upon a plan of action the three men left the room, Lomax congratulating himself upon his escape.

Acting promptly and with success, it was

The Skeleton Schooner.

not many hours before they had the piratical nest in the city in their power, and leaving for his subordinates the work of caring for them, Captain Norton organized a crew of picked men, and that night the Jack-o'-lantern started upon her return voyage, Percy Wyndham in command, and his aim to haul down the black flag of the famous Skimmer of the Seas.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE SURPRISE.

In the deep waters of a lagoon, almost wholly hidden by the overhanging branches of trees, festooned with Spanish moss, lay as trim-looking a vessel as the eye of a seaman would care to look upon.

Long-bodied, narrow, deep in the water, and with low bulwarks, pierced for guns, raking masts, and bows as sharp as a razor, and we have the Skeleton Schooner, who had become known far and wide, over sea and land, by her ghastly name, to which had also been added that of the Skimmer of the Sea, from the fact that she seemed to fairly skim over the waters when driven by her immense spread of canvas.

But the schooner was now undergoing repairs, as it showed numerous recent ghastly wounds in hull, bulwarks, spars and rigging.

It was evident, from her torn decks and general appearance, that the fleet craft had suffered severely, and how it had escaped was hard to tell.

But it had escaped from the savage fire at close quarters of two large war vessels, and shown a clean pair of heels that defied all pursuit, though she carried two-thirds of her crew dead and wounded upon her decks.

Seeking her haven of refuge, the Skeleton Schooner had laid up for repairs, and the sound of the ax echoed in the forest near by, where her men were cutting timber.

There were but few men upon her deck, and a cry from one of them, in a cheery voice, at once caused a commotion, for he had sung out:

"Sail ho!"

There, not far distant was a graceful yacht visible, coming up the lagoon, and drawn along by the foliage upon the banks.

The cry brought a tall form from the cabin, and the crew ashore, also came on board, until a score of men were ready to secure the yacht.

But, though the yacht also saw the schooner, and must know its character, from hiding there for repairs, instead of seeking port, the crew on board showed no dread of it.

Nearer and nearer the yacht came, until suddenly it was lashed firmly alongside.

"Well, Lomax, how many?" called out the leader, who stood upon the deck of the schooner.

"We have two-score men, sir," was the reply, and then, in trumpet tones came the cry:

"Follow me, men, and take yonder craft, for this is the famous Skimmer of the Seas."

The speaker bounded forward upon the schooner's decks, pistol and cutlass in hand, and two-score brave men followed him with a cheer.

The astounded buccaneers knew not what to do, and some were cut down before they could fly, or cry for quarter, and in less than ten minutes the Skeleton Schooner was in the hands of Percy Wyndham and the crew he had shipped in New Orleans, aided by Lomax and the others of the yachtsmen, who had willingly joined the honest party to save their necks and get pardons for their dishonesty.

Deserted in the time of need by his men, the pirate leader sprung overboard, and disappeared beneath the dark waters of the lagoon; but he had been first seen on the deck of the Skeleton Schooner, and recognized by Mabel Mortimer, who congratulated herself upon her narrow escape from becoming the wife of a pirate, who had been playing such a deep game as a yachtsman, when he was in reality a buccaneer whose name had long spread terror over the Gulf, persons little believing that the handsome gambler, Frank Forrester, was other than a man whose nimble fingers won for him a fortune at cards.

Keeping the Jack-o'-lantern as his own special prize, Percy Wyndham sent Mabel in it to her home, while he carried the schooner round to New Orleans to deliver over to the authorities there, who at once made a lion of him for his great capture.

But he was anxious to return to his home, and upon his arriving there was startled and

grieved to find that his mother had escaped, as well as Duke the negro prisoner.

For the captivity of the latter he little cared, having accomplished his purpose; but a diligent search was made for his poor crazy mother, though without success, and it was at last given up in the belief that she had taken her own life, and her loving son swore that the secret of her duel with Major Mortimer should die with her.

Although after all he had done for Mabel Mortimer, Percy Wyndham found that her brother was even more bitter than ever, and though he had learned to love the maiden devotedly, he felt that they could never clasp hands across the two graves that lay between them; and bitterly he mourned over his sad fate.

Shortly after the return of Percy, from his capture of the Skeleton Schooner, another tragedy was enacted almost beneath the shadow of The Everglades, for the haughty young planter was seen to shoot dead in his tracks Juan Gito who had come to the mansion to see him.

What it was about no one knew; but ere her brother fired Mabel distinctly heard the fisherman say:

"I will have the money, for I did my best, and here is your ring, for I recognized you, Mark Mortimer, beneath your mask."

They were the last words he ever uttered, for he fell under the fire of the young planter, who sprung into his yacht and set sail for New Orleans, where he entered upon a wild life that made his name famous.

As for Bessie, the Lady of the Lagoon, she disappeared suddenly from her cabin home, after the burial of her father, and rumor had it that she entered the convent of the St. Ursulines though no one seemed to know exactly what had become of her.

And though their homes adjoined, though their hearts loved each other with passionate fervor, Mabel Mortimer and Percy Wyndham were held apart by the cruel vendetta that had dug graves and reared up grim phantoms between them, and cast a shadow upon their lives forever.

THE END.

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